


Nasty or Normal?



Illustrations by Victor Juharz

IF YOU THINK THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IS NEGATIVE, take a look at the vicious history of electing the country's leader

By Richard Benedetto



Every four years, we read and hear laments on how this presidential campaign is the nastiest, dirtiest, meanest, and most negative in the history of the republic. Good-government organizations and other utopian-minded groups and individuals wring their hands over it, whining that the bickering and backstabbing are the main reasons why large numbers of people don't vote. College professors and editorial writers echo those cries, telling students and readers that the system is hopelessly corrupt and in need of drastic reform. If only better-mannered people ran for public office, many theorize with noses in the air, everything would be so much better.

But sadly, those who think this way operate under the illusion of a myth—the myth that there was once a great golden age of American politics, when every politician had the wisdom of Solomon, the honesty of George Washington, the manners of Sir Walter Raleigh, and the compassion of Mother Teresa. Sounds good, except it never was so. As Robert McClure, a political science and public affairs professor at the Maxwell School, points out, American political campaigns have always been nasty, dating back to 1800 and the first partisan presidential election between President John Adams and Vice President Thomas Jefferson—two men who despised one another. “Adams and his surrogates called Jefferson an atheist and a whoremaster,” McClure says. “Jefferson and his friends made fun of Adams’s rotund figure and accused him of being a loyalist to the English crown.”

Paul F. Boller Jr., professor emeritus of history at Texas Christian University and the author of several popular books debunking myths in American histo-



ry, wrote in the preface to his new book, *Presidential Campaigns—From George Washington to George W. Bush*: “Presidential campaigns have been mean and nasty lately, but the fact is they weren’t very nice in the old days, either.... Abigail Adams lamented that the contest between her husband John and Thomas Jefferson had exuded enough venom to ‘ruin and corrupt the minds of the best people in the world.’ In 1864, *Harper’s Weekly* published a depressingly long list of all the vicious epithets hurled at Abraham Lincoln during his bid for re-election. And in 1884, Lord Bryce, sojourning in the New World, was astonished to find that the [Grover] Cleveland-[James G.] Blaine match had come to center on the ‘copulative habits’ of one candidate and the ‘prevaricative habits’ of the other.” (For those wondering, Cleveland was charged with being the copulator and Blaine the prevaricator.)

Among the “vicious epithets” hurled at Lincoln, *Harper’s* listed “despot,” “liar,” “thief,” “buffoon,” “swindler,” “ignomineous,” and “butcher.” Sound familiar? Similar epithets have been fired at President George W. Bush, now in a bitter struggle against Democrat John Kerry to win a second term and evade the fate that befell his father, George H.W. Bush, who lost his 1992 re-election bid to Bill Clinton. Visit the bookstores and scan the titles of the explosion of books written on the current Bush presidency and you get a sense of the invective the president’s enemies and detractors are blasting him with. A book by David Corn is titled *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception*. Another, by Jack Huberman, carries the provocative title of *The Bush-Hater’s Handbook: A Guide to the Most Appalling Presidency of the Past 100 Years*. And then there is the Paul Waldman opus, *Fraud: The Strategy Behind the Bush Lies and Why The Media Didn’t Tell You*.

Past history notwithstanding, we again this year hear the cries that Kerry and Bush are fouling the air with their poisonous attacks and counterattacks on one another. And if we don’t do something about it, the nation is doomed to crumble into extinction like ancient Greece or the Roman Empire.

John Zogby G’74, a Utica, New York-based pollster who holds an M.A. degree from the Maxwell School, agrees that American political campaigns have historically been nasty. But he says one big reason why people these days think they are nastier than ever is because of the way the news media cover campaigns—accenting the negative. Given the fact that we now have 24-hour news cable-TV networks, a panoply of radio talk shows, the Internet, and a sense of growing competition among the traditional news outlets, Americans are flooded with political news, much of it argumentative. “We live in a media age and everything is amplified,” Zogby says.

Case in point: Early in July, one day after Kerry named North Carolina Senator John Edwards to be his vice presidential running mate, Bush, traveling in Edwards’s home state, was asked by a reporter how he thought the dynamic and charismatic Edwards stacked up against his plodding and less-exciting vice president, Dick Cheney. Without missing a beat, Bush tersely replied, “Dick Cheney can be president.” Members of the White House press corps traveling with Bush that day quickly interpreted his remark in support of his own vice president’s competence and qualifications as an attack on Edwards’s perceived lack of experience for the number-two job. And most reported that Bush was wasting no time going negative against Edwards.

The Kerry campaign immediately cried foul, issuing a press release under the headline “Bush Hits The Panic Button” and featuring a statement by Kerry strategist Tad Devine. “The president is hitting the panic button over the Kerry-Edwards ticket when he should be hitting it over his failed policies,” Devine said. “The fact that the president of the United States is personally taking swipes at the Kerry-Edwards ticket a mere day after it was announced speaks volumes.... It’s just disappointing that the president of the United States would stoop to this kind of political bickering.”

Kerry took Bush’s statement to heart and fired back. Campaigning in Dayton, Ohio, he said Edwards “has more experience and better judgment than George Bush when he became president.” Kerry also couldn’t resist reviving the old canard that Cheney—not Bush—really is the president. “He was right

that Dick Cheney was ready to take over on Day One—and he did,” Kerry asserted to the delight of his partisan crowd.

The media couldn’t resist the bait. Although the candidates each made substantive speeches that day, Bush on judicial nominations and Kerry on a melange of domestic and foreign policy issues, the headlines played up the attacks. “Bush questions Edwards’s qualifications for top job,” read a headline in *The Washington Post*. “Candidates trade barbs over running mates,” said *USA Today*. “Kerry, W Spar Over Edwards,” blared the *New York Daily News*. TV took a similar tack, shouting that the “gloves are off” and that the campaign was getting “nasty.”

Thomas Patterson, a former Maxwell School professor who now is the Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at the Shorenstein Center of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, says that over the past 20 years or so the number of so-called “negative” ads aired by the candidates has risen sharply, lending the impression that the rhetoric of political campaigns has become more coarse. At the same time, he notes, with more money being spent on advertising than ever before, the chances of potential voters seeing them repeatedly are that much higher. “We seem to be kind of stuck in that aggressive mode,” Patterson says.

This year’s campaign has had its incidents that have helped give credence to the notion that civility has all but disappeared. This one also involved Cheney. Back in late June, when members of the U.S. Senate were milling around on the chamber floor prior to taking an official group photo, Cheney, who as vice president serves as president of the Senate, crossed paths with Senator Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat and frequent Cheney critic. The two exchanged words.

According to *The Washington Post*, the confrontation began when Leahy crossed the aisle and joked to Cheney about being on the Republican side. Cheney had apparently been smarting over Leahy’s biting allegations that the vice president had a hand in steering lucrative no-bid contracts in Iraq to Halliburton, a company Cheney headed before joining the Bush ticket in 2000. In response, the vice president told the Vermont Democrat he didn’t appreciate his criticisms. A stunned Leahy returned the fire by saying he didn’t appreciate attempts by conservative groups supporting Bush to paint him as “anti-Catholic” in opposing the confirmation of the president’s judicial nominee William Pryor, a Catholic. Cheney responded by telling Leahy to “f--- yourself.”

Although the remark was made privately, the news media reported that it was uttered “on the Senate floor,” making it sound as if it was delivered in the course of a public Senate debate. It was not. The Senate was not in session. And the news media wouldn’t have known about it had not Leahy and his aides, like kids running to tell the teacher that someone said a bad word, spilled the tale to reporters.

Once the story was out, the outrage was swift, especially from the political opposition. “Cheney Uses Big-Time Swear Word: V.P. Caught C-U-S-S-I-N-G,” said the headline on a news release put out by the Democratic National Committee (DNC). A week later, the DNC again highlighted the expletive in spoofing what it called “The Bush-Cheney School of Values and Decorum.” Sidney Blumenthal, a former Clinton aide and an avowed Bush detractor, referring to Cheney as “Dick F-word Cheney,” wrote that the usually cool and calm vice president “cracked” under the pressure of charges that

he misled the country on the urgency of going to war in Iraq and of polls that showed the Bush-Cheney campaign slipping. High-minded newspaper editorials also chimed in, saying the vice president should be ashamed of himself for stooping so low and serving as such a poor example for the nation's youth. Some editorials were so high-faluting that they sounded like parodies. Despite the uproar his use of the f-word set off, Cheney remained unapologetic. Asked about the incident a few days later on Fox News, Cheney said he was just getting something off his chest. "I felt better after I said it," he said.

Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, a Bush-Cheney supporter, tried to add a dose of reality to the mushrooming flap. In a July 2 column in *The Washington Post*, Krauthammer asked what all the Cheney fuss was about, given how rough the political discourse is anyway. "Odd," he wrote. "The day before first reports of Cheney's alleged indiscretion, his Democratic predecessor, Al Gore, delivered a public speech in which he spoke of the administration's establishing a 'Bush gulag' around the world and using 'digital brown shirts' to intimidate the media. The former vice president of the United States compared the current president to both Hitler and Stalin in the same speech...and nary a complaint is heard about a breach of civility."

But naughty language this year is not the exclusive domain of the Republicans. Teresa Heinz Kerry, the outspoken wife of the Democratic candidate, told Colin McNickle, editorial page editor of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, to "shove it" after he pressed her to elaborate on her earlier public complaint about "un-American" tactics in politics. The incident occurred in Boston on the eve of the opening of the Democratic National Convention in late July. Heinz Kerry attended a reception for fellow Pennsylvanians, telling them, "We need to turn back some of the creeping, un-Pennsylvanian and sometimes un-American traits that are coming into some of our politics." When McNickle asked Heinz Kerry what she meant by the term "un-American," she snapped, "I didn't say that" several times and turned away. When McNickle encountered her again later, he continued his questioning. Clearly miffed, she told him: "You said something I didn't say. Now shove it."

Kerry was quick to defend his wife. "I think my wife speaks her mind appropriately," he said when told of the incident. A day later, New York Democratic Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, known to speak her mind herself, showed support for Heinz Kerry on CNN's *American Morning*. She said, "A lot of Americans are going to say, 'Good for you. You go, girl,' and that's certainly how I feel about it."

As the campaign entered its final weeks, supporters of Bush and Kerry got into a bruising fistfight over the two candidates' military service during the Vietnam War. Bush backers, including several officers who served with Kerry in Vietnam, charged in a series of hard-hitting TV ads that



the Massachusetts senator exaggerated his claims of heroism while commanding a Swift Boat during a four-month stint there. They also slammed Kerry for his post-war testimony before Congress charging U.S. troops with war crimes. Kerry and his backers fought back by repeating charges that Bush never fully met his obligations while serving as a jet fighter pilot in the Texas Air National Guard. They also alleged that as a son of a congressman, he got favorable treatment in getting into the Guard to avoid the draft. The case took a bizarre turn when a dispute arose over the authenticity of documents on which Bush critics were basing their arguments.

Maxwell's McClure, who takes issue with those who keep crying that the political debate has fallen to record lows, says he doesn't quite understand why Americans have come to believe that if politicians say something critical of their opponents, even if it's true, they are being nasty. Comparing records and pointing out differences, he says, have long been a staple of political campaigns. He believes the public needs to look at campaigns for what they are—contests between two people who have different approaches to the job—and lighten up. "I don't think you can conduct democratic political campaigns without having acrimony," McClure says. "I don't want to go back to the scurrilous attacks of the past. But there are tough, big differences between the candidates and there is no way to paper them over."

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