

**THE MEDIA, THE PUBLIC AND  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
CANDIDATES' IMAGES IN  
THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION**

by

**Dean Alger**

Research Paper R-14  
October 1994

The Joan Shorenstein Center

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Harvard University  
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### Introduction

The presidential election of 1992 was called "surprising," "crazy," "unpredictable" by many journalists, analysts and some scholars. President Bush called it "a weird year." In the preface to *The Election of 1992*, Gerald Pomper says: "As much as George Bush, the conventional wisdom about American politics took a beating in 1992" (1993, p. vii). But perhaps the developments in that election are not so inexplicable. With a little systematic investigation of underlying forces and patterns, a fair amount of that apparent craziness might just be explainable.

The most intriguing main element of the '92 presidential election was the nature of the changes in the images of the three major candidates. Political scientists have noted for some time that there are three basic categories of matters people consider in determining their vote for major office. Political party identification, a long term determinant, is the traditional prime factor. That factor has weakened greatly, however, as is well documented.

Concerns about policy issues are a second category. Abundant evidence documents the low level of political knowledge of most Americans, as well as a rather substantial lack of coherence of ideological thinking (see, e.g., Niemi and Weisberg, 1993, and Neuman, 1986). This makes for an uneven and shaky foundation on which to build explanations of the vote tied specifically to given candidates—particularly when combined with the fact that candidates tend to prefer diffuse rather than clear-cut communications and position-taking (Patterson, 1980). In a few elections though, there is an issue of overriding salience for the electorate, particularly when it touches people's lives in vital ways and is widespread. The 1992 presidential election did include such an issue—the economy—as is discussed below and as was much noted during the election. This is not by any means a sufficient explanation of the '92 voting results, though, as this paper discusses in some detail. Further, exactly how concern for the economy translates into specific voting choices, and how campaign efforts by the candidates affect that translation, must be explained.

The third category of determinants of the vote, the short-term factor of *candidate evalua-*

*tion*, has become the increasingly prominent determinant in the media age. The rise of campaign consultants and the increased use of primaries with direct, mass citizen involvement in the nomination stage of presidential elections, have furthered the importance of candidate evaluation. This is particularly the case with television so central a factor in campaigns in the late twentieth century. A central and critical element of candidate evaluation is the image of the candidate's character and personality. This is detailed a little later.

### On Data Sources, Methods and the Democracy '92 Study

This research is part of a larger study of the role of the mass media in the 1992 presidential election, prominently including the public's involvement in the process. The larger study is called "Democracy '92" and is co-directed by Professors Marion Just (Wellesley College), Ann Crigler (University of Southern California), Timothy Cook (Williams College), Montague Kern (Rutgers University), Darrell West (Brown University) and the author of this paper. The study is being conducted in collaboration with the Shorenstein Center.

The Democracy '92 study has monitored and has been conducting content analyses of the national news on the four networks (including CNN), as well as the local news in four areas in four different regions of the nation: Los Angeles, Boston, Winston-Salem, N.C., and Fargo, N.D.-Moorhead, Minnesota. The leading local TV news show (or two leading news shows in Los Angeles and Boston) and the prime local newspaper in those areas have been selected for analysis. Political ads, candidates' appearances on national TV talk shows (from *Nightline* to *Arsenio Hall*), debates and convention speeches are also being content analyzed. To ascertain the impact of those communications on the public, public opinion surveys were conducted in the local areas, in-depth interviews were conducted with a panel of 12-16 citizens in each of the four areas at several key junctures during the election year, and focus groups of 8 to 12 citizens were conducted in each local area. These instruments were employed at the time of the state primary,

in late September-early October, and at the end of October. (In Moorhead, strictly local polling was not done until the final wave; coordination was secured with the Minnesota Poll and statewide data were obtained.) A "baseline" set of interviews was also conducted in each area in late January. The people interviewed represented a good range of demographics and political orientation. The focus groups were designed to look at people who were not at the extremes of political orientation or interest; the intention was to tap the broad base of the electorate who would genuinely be in the process of decision through the election.

For this paper the principal data sources are the four local area surveys and the focus groups conducted during the general election, as well as national polling data.

### **Setting the Scene: The Climate of Opinion on Politics and Economics—and the Orientation of the News Media**

Two elements of public opinion constituted fundamental aspects of the '92 election environment; they were foundations of the electoral politics of 1992. One of those elements was a pervasive and deep displeasure with "politics as usual." The public overwhelmingly felt the political system was not working correctly, that politicians spent too much time name-calling and blaming the other guy, that monied special interests had far too much influence, and that government gridlock was out of control. This state of opinion had, in fact, been building for some time. As *Newsweek* noted in a major article in the October 1, 1990 issue, "People are fed up with politics as usual" (*Newsweek*, 1990, p. 28). Columnist Tom Wicker reported in October 1991 the results of focus groups conducted under the bipartisan auspices of pollster Peter Hart and political consultant Doug Bailey: "The public's frustration with politics is real and their mistrust of the political process runs very deep..." (Wicker, 1991, p. 16A). In the in-depth interviews conducted for the Democracy '92 project in late January 1992, this message was picked up loud and clear.

Also involved in that displeasure with politics as usual, as we found beginning with our primary season interviews and focus groups, was a profound antipathy towards negative campaigning—the worst of politics as usual in the campaign realm, people felt. And correlatively, what we heard people say, with a depth and intensity not seen in a long time, was that they wanted to

hear what the candidates were really going to do about the problems that affected their lives, rather than "just slamming the other guy." All this had profound consequences for each of the candidates in electorally fateful ways, as well as for the news media, as we shall see. The second major profile of public opinion that was truly fundamental for this election was dissatisfaction with the state of the economy, as was evident from numerous polls. Only two important particulars need be noted. First and more obviously, people thought the economy was in bad shape and they thought President Bush did not understand that macroeconomic fact or how average individuals were struggling in their everyday lives. From our baseline in-depth interviews, it was striking how much Bush was already hurt in that specific respect as early as January 24-26. One interviewee (who was not a strong partisan and who could not name any Democratic candidate) well represented the general pattern of opinion: "But, like after the [Gulf] war, you know, Bush was pretty popular there; but people forget pretty fast, you know, once they start getting hit in the pocketbook and stuff they start forgetting about that." And a couple of minutes later he continued: "I think [Bush] has a hard time understanding what the middle class is going through right now and things like that. He should come over and stay at someone's house for a while and find out, you know, first hand how hard it can be.... I think he's more concerned with foreign affairs and things like that than he is [with things] around here first—unemployment and all that stuff."

The second point on public opinion on the economy is one not so well noted: people did not think the economic problem was just a simple, standard economic downturn; they thought there were fundamental structural problems that needed addressing and were not being addressed. A CNN/USA Today poll in January, for example, found that 55% of the public felt the economy needed "a complete overhaul" (cited in Gelb, 1992, p. 16A).

A more general measure of the climate of public opinion, which clearly has the former two realms as its central pillars, is the classic "right track-wrong track" question asked in opinion surveys about how things are going in the country. The "on the wrong track" answer has been at high or very high levels since 1990—with a temporary dip during the Gulf War. A good illustration of this, as well as an omen for Bush, was found in a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll. In October 1991, the poll found 64% approved of the

job Bush was doing but 77% thought the country was on the wrong track (cited in *U.S. News*, 1991, p. 38). That gap between approval of the job Bush was doing and how people felt the country was doing wouldn't last long; the frustration did.

The news media also entered the 1992 election with a distinct "state of mind" which was of significance for the campaign. That orientation was clearly a product of much soul-searching in the aftermath of a performance in the 1988 presidential election that had been universally condemned as dismal. The intention to more effectively hold the candidates accountable was strong—both regarding the ads in specific and regarding their communications in general. As Tim Russert, NBC Vice President and Washington Bureau Chief, said in early February 1992:

After the 1988 campaign, I did sit down, along with a lot of other people, and tried to reflect on what we did that had gone wrong.... I actually brought in a group of reporters and I said, "you know, this isn't working." I said "...what are we doing night after night: they give us the podium, they give us the back drop, they give us the sound bite.... And it's being put on the air...." [But then in fall '91:] When President Bush went to the Grand Canyon about six weeks ago and signed a piece of environmental legislation, all three networks did pieces which said, "George Bush went to the Grand Canyon today and staged a photo op. Here with an analysis of his environmental record is this particular correspondent." And the White House said "my God, there is something serious going on here!"...I think there has been a profound change in the way we conduct our business.... (*Political Communication Report*, 1992, pp. 4, 6)

As soon as the Gennifer Flowers scandal story erupted, however, journalists quickly fell off the wagon—for the first couple of months of the campaign at least. But by the end of the primaries, polls showed a high level of disgust with the dominance of scandal and sleaze stories. For example, a CNN-*Time* magazine poll found 82% of the public thought the press "pays too much attention to a candidate's personal life" (*National Journal*, 1992, p. 474). The news media seemed to gradually get the message that the public wanted less feeding frenzies on scandal and more on what these candidates were going to do about the economy, health care and the other problems affecting peoples' lives. There was a determination by the major news organizations thereafter to get back to their original intentions.

(See, e.g., The Media and Campaign '92 reports from the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center on the intentions and self-reported actions of reporters and editors through the rest of the campaign.)

## IMAGES I: THE CLINTON CASE

### Candidate Evaluation and the Image Factor

Candidate evaluations involve classic civics course elements like candidates' relevant governmental experience and other particulars of formal qualifications for the office, along with assessment of the leadership capacity of the candidates. But candidate evaluations also involve very human judgements, often quite implicit in nature, about what kind of a person the candidate is. This is especially so because of the rather low level of the average person's political knowledge and because, on a daily basis, most people naturally worry about and pay most attention to their family, their boss at work, paying the mortgage, etc., not about politics. Thus, people seek shortcuts to sorting out what the candidates are like. People naturally make assessments of the person, just as they do in regular life circumstances—except that the candidate-person is seen and read about through the mass media. As they watch and read some amount of news and other modes of candidate communications, with varying levels of attention, people gradually build up an *image* of each of the candidates.

Very central to the image people build up are key aspects of the candidate's character and personality. Honesty and integrity have repeatedly appeared at the top of people's lists of the ideal candidate in studies of that conception (e.g., Sigel, 1966; Buchanan, 1991, p. 83). Whether candidates seem to be empathetic and caring is another important element, since "average folks" want to feel that a candidate is likely to understand the real problems they face and to care enough about people like them to work for improvement of those problems. A bit less specifically, people make judgements about whether a candidate is a "good person" as well as a moral person (in presidential terms, an Eisenhower, not a Nixon).

Another aspect of character and personality, about which it is difficult to be precise and tangible but which seems important, is a personal and psychological response that is usually quite subconscious. People seem to more readily accept the idea of voting for candidate X if they feel like they can "embrace" the candidate as a person;

will they psychologically "let her/him in" to their affective selves, is the question. Being warm and engaging (or at least effectively projecting those qualities, like Reagan) is certainly a key factor in this. Dukakis was the prime recent "how not to do it" example—he seemed to have no ability to make a warm, engaging human connection with people. One dimension of evidence for this conception is found in the work of the Dartmouth group of Roger Masters, John Lanzetta, et al. on differential responses to facial displays of various candidates. As they observe, "Psychologists have long recognized the face as the primary channel for affective communication.... Moreover, the communicative effects of facial expressions involve the vicarious instigation of an emotion in the viewer." (Lanzetta, et al., 1985, p. 86) And among their conclusions were: "Facial displays are capable of arousing and influencing viewers even when embedded in the background of a TV newscast during which the leader's voice is not heard [though the voice, if warmly effective, can enhance the impact]"; and, "Different candidates vary in the way they are perceived and in the emotional responses they elicit." (Lanzetta, et al., 1985, p.112)

It should also be noted that the aggregate image people have of candidate X involves his/her party, campaign style and practices, issue stands, and perhaps ideology.

The successful candidates' dominance of the '84 and '88 campaign agendas with their photo ops and symbolic themes were striking illustrations of the centrality of image development as factors in presidential elections (see, e.g., Alger, 1987; Hershey, 1989). In 1992 candidate image was also a significant factor, but its impact was more complicated—and more interesting; the development of the public's images of Clinton, Bush and Perot represent key elements in campaign '92 in need of systematic explanation. The development of the candidates' images must also be considered in light of the state of public opinion, especially on the economy and on "politics and governance as usual," as well as other factors affecting perceptions of the candidates and the voters' process of decision-making. The pattern of the changes in the three candidates' images says much about more enduring elements of the mass media's role in presidential elections (for better and for worse).

### **Initial Image Development of Clinton and the Key Question of 1992**

Unlike President Bush, Bill Clinton was basically unknown to the general public as of the

beginning of 1992, and hence, his image would be fundamentally formed as election news and other communications got under way in the initial phases and events of the election year. Indeed, in mid-January, at least 70% of the public said they didn't know enough about Clinton to have an opinion about him. (Frankovic, 1993, p. 114) (This may be a high estimate of how well he was known then: Very few of the the Democracy '92 baseline interviewees, as late as Jan. 24–26, could even name Clinton, let alone knowing enough to have an opinion about him.)

Now, there have been rapid increases in candidate awareness levels in the past due to tremendous early primary and caucus coverage (Carter in '76, Hart in '84, Dukakis in '88). But as the Director of Surveys at CBS News observed, Clinton's rate of increase in the public's awareness "must be called astonishing" or "phenomenal" (Frankovic, 1993, pp.114, 115). It was much more dramatic than that of Dukakis: Just 5 weeks after 70% of the public indicated ignorance of Clinton, i.e., by the third week in February, "only 19% of registered voters said they had not heard enough about Clinton to form an opinion." (Frankovic, 1993, p.114) In comparison with Dukakis: "In March 1988 almost one third said they still had not heard enough about Dukakis to express an opinion.... In contrast, by March 1992, fewer than one in ten people had formed no opinion of Bill Clinton" (Frankovic, 1993, pp.115–116).

Now, during this period when (a) Clinton's image was being fundamentally and initially formed by the general public, and (b) when the public's level of awareness of him was skyrocketing at a "phenomenal" rate, what was the predominant nature of the communications through the mass media that were reaching the public and which the public was using to form an image of Clinton? More specifically, what were the prime news media emphases that were most likely to be remembered? What people are likely to have remembered most distinctly and strongly about Clinton was surely the large press feeding frenzy on scandal stories. As the *New York Times'* R.W. Apple, Jr. said in his Joe Alex Morris lecture: "Clinton was pounded for three weeks to a degree I've seldom seen a politician pounded." (8 April, 1993, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University)

The average person's tendencies in attention and memory are key here. As Thomas Patterson has pointed out: "The only practical way for most citizens to proceed [in their attention to the election and the candidates] is simply to follow the

news [etc.], paying attention only to its obtruding features, and thus being certain of acquiring only that information placed at the top of the news again and again." (Patterson, 1980, p. 110)

A profound impact on public opinion was evident. For example, in the Boston Democracy '92 survey conducted early in March (just before the Massachusetts and "super Tuesday" primaries) we asked what was the "most important event in the presidential election." "Clinton's scandals" were the second most mentioned "event," second only to Buchanan's electoral success (in the New Hampshire primary). And the latter was probably skewed high in the Boston area at that time because of geographical and temporal proximity. Further, the key word in the question was "event," which was likely to elicit a response citing a single event, rather than a continuing story like the scandal stories.

The national polls provided further striking evidence of the impact of all that on Clinton's image. As William Schneider wrote [As early as February] "Clinton's negative ratings went up faster than his positive ratings. The ratio in the over-all electorate stood at 39% favorable to 32% unfavorable in *early February*. That is not a very strong showing at the outset of a campaign." (Emphasis added; Schneider, 1992A, p. 428) As Kathleen Frankovic has pointed out, drawing on the CBS-*New York Times* polls: "By *late March*, 40% of all registered voters held unfavorable views of Clinton. That was, historically, a watershed in candidate polling; such high unfavorable ratings tended to predict electoral defeat." (Emphasis added, 1993, p. 116) And that was not the nadir of perceptions of Clinton. In fact, as late as mid-June, the CBS-*New York Times* poll showed Clinton still viewed unfavorably by 40% and *only 16%* held favorable views (Emphasis added; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 1992, p. 7A ). Capsulizing it all (and furthering the news portrayal of that nature) was the April 20 issue of *Time* magazine: the cover, with a picture of Clinton in photo negative, said "Why voters don't trust Clinton." And a *Time/CNN* poll (from April 9) found that 53% of the public did not think Clinton was "*honest and trustworthy enough to be president*" (*Time*, 1992, p. 41). In the primary season in-depth interviews and focus groups done for Democracy '92 we picked up this lack of trust of Clinton quite strongly.

This then raises a (if not *the*) central question in election '92: How in the world did Clinton overcome that enormous image problem—especially in light of previous study findings to the effect that an image formed early on, in reasonably

distinct fashion, is very difficult to undo later? As Thomas Patterson found in his research: "Importantly, even in the campaign's final stages, the more intense partisanship and the more overtly partisan media communication did not completely override those early impressions.... [I]mpressions that people acquired tended to last throughout the campaign. In 80% of the cases, any single impression of a candidate held during the general election related more closely to *earlier* impressions of him than to partisanship." (And, in a footnote, he noted: "This finding has particular significance because of the method of measuring images....") (Patterson, 1980, p. 150)

### Explanation: Keynotes in the Rebuilding of the Clinton Image

Faced with that image problem, as of late spring, Clinton had to find or do something that would have a powerful effect and which could overcome the existing, initially built-up image. And, given the difficulty of altering a built-up image, that something needed to involve a mode and manner of communication that would somehow get through the existing image structure—and perhaps would be mentally processed in a different way. The question was then, what would ultimately undermine the existing image, what communication approach would do so—or at least do so enough to ease the concerns and let other matters dominate.

There are various factors that were significant in Clinton's ultimately successful appeal to the electorate, the most prominent of which were the elements of the climate of public opinion noted above. These factors were clearly important in how people mentally processed information and images from the campaign. I would also argue that the unique nature of the medium of television was very important here, in conjunction with Clinton's exceptional ability to communicate through TV. The Clinton campaign clearly saw this, along with the image problem:

[T]he sudden mushrooming of candidate appearances in [info-tainment programs] started with a decision by the Clinton campaign to put their candidate on television as much as possible.... Their internal research, conducted mainly with focus groups, showed that by the end of the primaries, many voters had closed their minds on the Clinton candidacy. In May and June, voters were not prepared to hear Clinton's message of change.... Blocking this message was the widespread perception that Bill Clinton was

just another politician. (Emphasis added, Arterton, 1993, pp. 90-91)

The Clinton campaign also found what Democracy '92 found in the interviews and focus groups: people had the notion that Clinton came from a wealthy, privileged background—an image interestingly driven in significant part by visual images of his personal style and dress (repeatedly cited). In fact, one person in a Moorhead focus group saw Clinton as wealthy, more or less elite, while he saw Perot as “a more regular guy.”

As a consequence of all that: “The campaign concluded that it had to re-position Clinton [i.e., reconstruct his image] by bringing the facts of his early life to light and by showing him off in settings [i.e., modes of mass communication] that would *display his personal warmth*.” (Arterton, 1993, p. 91) Clinton was very good at communicating through the medium of television, verbally as well as visually. They knew he could effectively portray and purvey key personal strengths of appearing caring and warm, and of being very articulate and nice looking; and in general he could make a very good, engaging human connection with viewers/voters through TV (just what Dukakis was utterly unable to do).

A little theory should be added on the latter point about television; included in that material is evidence from experimental and theoretical research suggesting that visual images are processed in different fashion from verbal messages. As Jamieson and Campbell observe: “The language of the television screen is the language of close-ups... These typical close-up shots reflect the personal and social contact that is characteristic of television as a medium... Distance is related to intimacy. Television simulates intimate relationships...” (1983, p. 45)

Further, various social scientists have produced evidence that people tend to mentally process the visual dimension of TV different from the verbal dimension. As Gina Garramone reports: “The candidate’s facial expressions, body postures, and motions are all video-[visually-] contained information relevant to personality judgements. Thus, one would predict that persons attending to a political message to form a personality impression would pay more attention to the video channel and encode more visual information than would those attending to learn issue stands.” (Garramone, 1985, p. 286) Of course, most people, watching the TV news, talk/interview shows or ads in standard daily fashion, do not, as a rule, have a specific, formal

information agenda, like that implied by the uses and gratifications theory alluded to by Garramone. Indeed, as she proceeded to note: “Dramatic visuals might draw attention to the video channel while diverting attention from the audio channel. Because visual content tends to stimulate visual encoding (Rossiter and Percy, 1980), messages in which the visual content is dominant may facilitate iconic rather than verbal encoding [i.e., mental processing].” (Garramone, 1985, p. 207) And as cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner reports in his seminal work on that field, “in recent years, several workers, most especially Jerry Fodor (1983), have suggested that the mind is better construed as a number of largely separate information-processing devices, including ones constructed to deal with language, visual processing, music, and other such specific kinds of content.” (Gardner, 1987, p. 132)

With someone as good on TV as Clinton, his appearances on “info-tainment” shows, his half-hour town meeting on TV, etc., could reach people in relatively unmediated fashion and could stimulate information and image processing in a different, more implicit, very personally human manner that might just “bypass” the notions built up from news accounts. For illustration of Clinton’s talents on TV, including looking directly into the camera and speaking in highly believable fashion, review a tape of the Clinton “bio” film shown at the Democratic convention that summer. Particularly striking is the section with Chelsea talking about what her parents are like, which is accompanied by pictures of Clinton, followed by Governor Clinton talking about how Chelsea watched the early *60 Minutes* appearance of her parents and what she thought of it. (Key sections of this film were included in the half-hour Clinton infomercial aired on network TV election eve.)

As was reported in a paper from the Democracy '92 project, Clinton was effective in connecting with viewers along the “cares about people like you” line in his ads during the primaries and caucuses (West, Kern, Alger, 1992). A prime example was in his ad called “Ron,” on the health care issue. The ad had a small child with a heart problem as the key symbol, and had Governor Clinton effectively looking directly into the camera and talking in a way that is affectingly personal. As Professor Graber found in her major study of how people mentally process the news, regarding how people judge the honesty of communicators: “Where ‘physical appearance could be judged’ political communicators



were described as having an 'honest look' or lacking it; and a straight look into the eye (and camera) was seen as evidence of honesty, whereas avoidance of eye (and camera) contact was universally interpreted as a sign of dishonesty." (Graber, 1984, pp. 161-162)

So what Clinton did was to change strategy and, starting in early June, he went on many TV talk shows, as well as buying a half hour of time on NBC, June 12, for a "national town meeting" so he could appear in front of an audience of citizens answering questions (where he could display his ability to think on his feet and his knowledge of policy matters, in addition to his personal traits).

Marcia Hale, Political Director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, offered an interesting expert observation that is suggestive of the impact from Clinton's interview appearances, including both the messages and images purveyed in them: "One should not forget that the [Clinton] campaign had a very good June.... Their polling [on the eve of the convention] showed he had moved up ten points [from early] June.... Why? He had a good, positive message,...especially on change and new leadership." (Aired on C-SPAN, August 6, 1992) Indeed, according to CNN-Time polls, Clinton's unfavorable rating went steadily down from 40% in early June to 35% in early July to 27% in mid-July (just before the convention). Some polls also indicated his choice of Gore as running-mate assisted in that trend (Nelson, 1992, p. A15 ). (Hale also offered another appropriate observation: "Perot had offered them some cover by attacking Bush regularly" during that period.)

Poll evidence suggests a considerable impact from the info-tainment show appearances (by Perot as well as Clinton). The networks' collaborative exit poll (VRS) found: "'Infomercials' and television talk shows or interview shows were more likely than political ads to affect decision making. Nearly half the voters on Election Day said that the candidates' appearances on television talk shows helped them decide how to vote." (Frankovic, 1993, pp. 128-129)

The candidate appearances on the talk shows, especially in the cases of Clinton and Perot, clearly struck a chord. The discussion in the final Moorhead focus group demonstrated that fact:

Chuck: "Talk shows have become much more important in this campaign. All the daytime shows, Larry King. It's a different type of campaign, where they sit down and go one on one with somebody."

Jolene: "I agree.... [T]hey are coming right into your home, instead of you having to go out and stand in the street to listen to them with the campaign."

Carey (younger voter): "One thing that I thought was important in this election was that Clinton and Gore both went on MTV to the Choose or Lose forum. That was really informative.... It was the same kind of addressing the people, the same kind of thing he instigated [in June]. I think it was the town hall forum, where they'd get up and ask him a question and he would talk to that person and tell them directly a good answer."

It should also be noted that "[t]he talk shows especially influenced less-frequent voters, those who (it developed) were more likely to vote for Perot and Clinton." (Frankovic, 1993, pp. 128-129)

The talk shows were the prime target for Clinton's TV re-presentation of self—he was to "invade the pop culture through talk shows and call-in programs." (*Newsweek*, 1992B, p.41) But further, the Democratic National Convention was a prime opportunity to add significantly to the effort. Besides the large amount of TV exposure, specifically, as Mandy Grunwald put it: "If people don't know the basic facts about his life, his career and his message by the end of the convention, we are toast." (*Newsweek*, 1992, p.41)

Clinton got an historically high "bounce" from the national convention. "In the space of a few days [of the convention], Clinton had raised his share of public support by an extraordinary 25 percentage points." (Quirk and Dalager, 1993, p.69) And, "Former Perot supporters were going to Clinton over Bush by 45% to 25%." (ibid) The convention allowed large audiences relatively unmediated exposure to Clinton, with Clinton on TV a considerable time, and they heard the actual and remarkable story of his life. (Also note the extraordinary images the Clintons and Gores got on the covers and in the feature stories in that week's issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*, among other news media.)

Further, and quite importantly, with the Perot "departure" people were further encouraged to re-consider—to re-open their minds to—Clinton. The campaign then brilliantly followed immediately with the bus trip which was a series of photo ops of the best sort for coming across to average Americans. A key to why that was the case was found in the Democracy '92 interviews and focus groups in response to the question of "what image or picture" of Clinton stuck out most in peoples' minds. The image most frequently and prominently offered was Clinton wad-

ing into crowds and interrelating well and warmly with them. Not only was network coverage of the buscapade tremendous, but local coverage was so as well, both print and broadcast. For example, even before Clinton and Gore arrived in Minneapolis for the second bus trip, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* had 2 days of large feature stories on their stops along the way, followed by a large splash on the day of the rally in town (front-page stories with big color photo, the stories flowing over to two other pages, along with another full page of photos).

The early October focus group in Winston-Salem illustrated the impact of the convention: As a man of about 50 said, to nods and "Yeahs" from most of the group: "The Democratic convention, ... I believe 90% of the people that looked at it said, 'That's my man!' It was a fantastic show... They had some fine speakers. They said things we really wanted to hear." (By "things we wanted to hear" he meant speaking to the issues and putting things in perspective, not just pandering to people.)

At the national level, the CBS-New York Times polls showed the result regarding the Clinton image: "Before the convention, and Perot's withdrawal, only 56% said Clinton had the honesty and integrity to serve as president [though that was an improvement over the spring...]. By August, after Clinton's nomination, 70% said he did." (Frankovic, 1993, p.124) (Some evidence on the impact of the debates on peoples' image of Clinton is reviewed a little later.)

(Frankovic also notes that the percentage of the public feeling Clinton was honest and trustworthy enough to be president fell back to 52% in late October. This was in the wake of the relentless attack by Bush in ads and on the campaign trail—which drew on that earlier image of Clinton that remained in peoples' heads, even if dampened. It was a continuing question as to what would take precedence and prominence in people's minds as the prime image of the candidate and how they would decide what to principally accept, remember, etc. That decision process was surely affected by sources that were seen as more or less neutral—or at least not part of the candidates' campaigns, namely, the news media. This leads to the next point. But also, a little later we'll see evidence on the impact on images of Bush stemming from his own attack campaigning.)

## IMAGES II: THE EVOLUTION OF THE BUSH IMAGE

The patterns of news coverage had devastating consequences for the initial formation of Clinton's image in the public's mind in the early stages of campaign '92—as well as making electoral success difficult for him. But the news media functioned as a two-edged sword as the year wore on—especially for comparative candidate evaluation. First and in general, as Democracy '92 content analysis showed, Bush got substantial negative press (actually slightly more negative press, on the whole, than Clinton through early June, and through the election as a whole (Crigler, Just Cook, 1993)). This was almost certainly due to the economy and his lack of action on it (or apparent understanding of it), in principal part.

Still, at least in the general "character" and personality dimension of candidate image, Bush had a pretty positive image in the early months of the election. There was lingering potential for credibility problems due to questions about his involvement in Iran-Contra and due to the broken "no new taxes" pledge. But even after the Buchanan-battering he took over the latter in New Hampshire, he was still in rather good shape on image in the character category. The CBS-*New York Times* poll found, for example, as of March, 56% of the public said Bush "has more honesty and integrity than most people in public life." (Note that the wording is "people in public life," not "most politicians"....) Jerry Brown got only a 34% positive response to that question at that time and only 26% said that was the case for Clinton.

But a key element of the information environment in campaign '92, as was discussed above, was the post-1988 determination by the news media to serve as truth squad, to do "reality checks," as CBS News called their efforts. What is additionally interesting—and seemed to be effective—was the fact that the Clinton campaign made good use of the media efforts at critiquing candidate communications. As Arterton has noted: (in response to the Bush ad claiming Clinton will increase taxes on all sorts of middle class and working Americans) "...[C]ollecting quotes from newspaper ad watchers, Clinton had all the ammunition he needed to denounce Bush's ads. His rejoinder ad complained, "George Bush is running attack ads...: 'Misleading' says the *Washington Post*...." And Arterton noted that a number of other Bush ads were assailed in ad watches. Arterton summed up by saying:

"Many critics viewed the Bush advertising campaign as consisting of little more than attack ads directed against Clinton." (Arterton, 1993, p. 97)

Further, this newly aggressive media posture seemed to have had some impact on the campaigns. Harold Kaplan, key member of The November Company which did the Bush ad campaign, strikingly so testified in the "Election Debriefing" conference held at the Annenberg School of Communication (University of Pennsylvania, December 12, 1992): "'92 was a tough year for us because I don't think anybody remembered any of our messages. [Another] way things were different in '92 is I don't remember these 'reality checks' in '88. It was a terrible feeling when I used to open the (N.Y.) *Times* and they used to take my commercial apart, or watch CNN and they used to take my commercial apart.... I think, instead of being an agenda, they became a target...." (Note the specific name for the ad critiques that came to his mind when he was speaking extemporaneously; instead of the generic term "ad watch" or "ad critique," which one would normally use in reference to the general phenomenon, he used the psychologically revealing name "reality check," which was used by only one news outlet.)

There was, in addition, a general climate of suspicion of manipulative and misleading ads amongst the public in 1992 that seemed decidedly more substantial than in previous elections and that seemed a bit more "wised up" regarding the tricks of the ad trade. This seems to include an explicit cognizance of the 1988 experience. This is difficult to systematically prove, but comments from the subjects in focus groups conducted for the Democracy '92 study give strong suggestive evidence for such a conclusion. For an excellent example (from the Moorhead, Minn. focus group of self-identified undecideds, final wave, on October 29):

Brenda: "They're [the ads are] so out and out bad, it reflects on the candidate. Why put them out in the first place?"

Chuck: "Because it worked last time. Earlier someone said this was the most negative campaign they've ever seen. Well, I think four years ago was probably much more negative and it worked overwhelmingly for Bush...."

Carey: "Kind of scare tactics."

Bonnie: "Yeah, I think you're right."

Jeanene: "You know, look, Willie Horton ad."

Brenda: "I think they think it works; I don't think it really works."

More reflection followed on how "it" might

work to some extent, along with recognition of the reality of the limited way average people usually pay attention to ads, but the cognizance is clear.

Further, there was an interesting perception of the news media's ad watches and why they would feel the need to do them. As one person in the focus group drawn on in the previous paragraph said: "The commercials were bad enough to make national news, on top of just being weird and bad." And in the final focus group in Winston-Salem similar thoughts were expressed (following exposure to TV ad watches):

Middle-aged woman: "And that the news media clearly see this [questionable numbers used in ads] as a problem or they wouldn't spend time on it."

Man, about 40: "Exactly."

First woman: "The news media clearly sees these half truths as..."

First man interrupting: "They're very misleading."

First woman continues, with a couple of other heads nodding: "They're very misleading to the general public who the news media serve daily..."

Woman about 40 breaks in: "And it sells their time."

Original woman: "And they want to make sure they're not party to all of the half truths on this vehicle, which in fact is their livelihood."

30-something man: "There's one thing about the media in this election, I think more so that, when they know an ad is misleading, they come out and tell ya, more during this campaign than in previous ones. You know, they'll tell you why it is that it's misleading and they'll tell you the source where they got the information...."

(The study found some ambivalence regarding ad critiques, especially in the early months—with comments like "we don't want [the news media] to tell us what to think." But there seemed an increasing recognition of the value of ad watches by the general election, as the foregoing illustrates.)

There was also a real impact on public opinion regarding the Bush ads as a result of the media ad watch efforts and the state of public mind just noted. The Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press surveys, "as early as Oct. 6,.. found that voters who had been exposed to the commercials were more likely to rate Clinton's ads as 'more truthful and convincing.' 51% said the Democrat's ads were basically truthful vs. 35% who said they were not. Meanwhile, 50% thought Bush's ads were not truthful and 38%

said they were." (Arterton, 1993, p. 101) Surveys thereafter showed that trend continuing.

Relatedly, there were interesting and important findings from the Democracy '92 opinion surveys. In Winston-Salem, for example, (which was a target state for both the Bush and Clinton campaigns), the survey in the fourth wave found: 67.4% thought that "most of Bush's ads attacked his opponent", while only 15.4% thought they "explained his [own] views." But 43.4% of people in Winston-Salem thought most of Clinton's ads explained his views, while only 40.7% thought they were mostly attack ads. And even more strikingly, 52% of those people thought Bush was "more responsible for negative campaigning" (in general), while only 22% thought Clinton was. The Moorhead results were about the same; in Los Angeles and Boston, the gap between Bush and Clinton on those perceptions was even greater. In the study's in-depth interviews, from early on, people made clear they were sick and tired of candidates who "just bash the other guy" and "don't tell what they're gonna do about the problems we really care about."

It is also interesting to note Mandy Grunwald's observations regarding the ad strategy used by their campaign. "The ads we did about the President used his words almost exclusively. We used film clips of him, interspersed with title cards, with statistics of unemployment and other things happening to the economy. Every time we tested them people said: 'It's his own words; it's fair, it's true.' [The ads] were, in a way, memory-joggers. As the President was trying to re-cast his image, they were a way of saying: 'This is the real George Bush, I remember it. How could he say we're not in a recession?!'" (From Annenberg School "Election Debriefing," December 12, 1992.) These video clips of Bush were especially used to tie him, in the public's mind, to the economic problem and lack of action on it (or even understanding of it), and hence to reinforce the idea of a negative referendum on Bush regarding that number one policy issue in the '92 electoral choice. (See Alger, Kern and West, 1993, for a detailed analysis of the content of the candidates' ads, including the Clinton ads' use of film of Bush, as well as discussion of the impact of the ads.)

Some theoretical perspective on the nature of the mass medium of television helps make clear the impact of that use of film of Bush:

[B]ecause television conveys action, movement, facial expression and demeanor..., as well as

verbal messages, [it] seems more complete, more satisfactory than any account provided by newspaper. "*Viewability*" is easily construed as reliability...and...the dramatic intensity of film and video recording carries conviction and guarantees authenticity in ways [mere] words cannot. (Emphasis added; T. Burns as quoted in Altheide and Snow, 1979, p. 98)

By the end of the campaign, Bush was having real problems with credibility and trust himself. Democracy '92 local surveys (virtually all of the sampling for which was done before the Walsh-Iran Contra revelation on the final Friday) asked whether people thought each candidate was "honest and trustworthy." In Los Angeles, 45% said Clinton was honest and trustworthy, while 31% said he was not; but only 35.5% thought Bush was honest and trustworthy, while 42.3% said he was not. Boston results were similar—though in Winston-Salem and Moorhead pluralities gave positive answers for both Bush and Clinton. A CBS-*New York Times* poll at the end of the campaign found almost half questioned Bush's trustworthiness (Frankovic, 1993, p. 121).

By the end of the campaign, the Bush image was, indeed, in deep trouble. Perhaps the most interesting evidence of his problems is the following; while a bit vague in form, this element of opinion is revealing in nature and deep in implication. In both fall waves and in all four of the local areas of the Democracy '92 opinion surveys, when asked whether each candidate "makes you feel worried," the response was overwhelming bad news for Bush. In the final Winston-Salem survey, for example, Bush worried 63% of the respondents, while only 46% were worried by Clinton. The perceived lack of understanding of or action on the economy by Bush was clearly at the core of this worry, but there is reason to conclude the worry was more comprehensive than that, as the following suggests.

A column in *Time* magazine probably expressed it best: "Bushed. In content if not in tone, that single word best describes the President's performance during his interview.... As the polls regularly probe the magnitude of his problem, the President demonstrated again that the problem is he..., the President seemed intellectually spent." (Kramer, 1992, p. 25) And beyond seeming to have little in the way of new ideas about the principal domestic problems, the opinion soundings of Democracy '92 found a perception that he was "bushed" in the more common sense of the colloquialism. In the in-depth interviews for the study, people repeatedly

reported seeing Bush as "tired, worn-out and old" (when asked to "describe the candidates") (Crigler, 1993).

Those two elements of the Bush image, by the fall, were not good news for him when change was clearly the order of the day for the electorate. Indeed, the CBS-*New York Times* poll as early as August asked a national sample: "Do you think electing Bush/Clinton... would bring about real change in the way things are going in the country or would things go on pretty much the way they are now?" They found almost 80% saying things would go on the same if Bush were elected, while 61% thought real change would occur if Clinton were elected. Subsequent polls indicated the great majority continued to hold that opinion regarding Bush through the fall. In the end, it would appear Senator Gore's chant in his Democratic convention speech summed up the public feeling: "It's time for [him] to go!"

### IMAGES III: THE ROLLERCOASTER AND PARADOX OF THE PEROT IMAGE

The other prime factor in need of good explanation is the Perot image. Clearly, the pervasive public attitude of displeasure with and distrust of "politics as usual" and "government in gridlock" forms the central foundation for the Perot candidacy. The sense, noted above, that the economy was in deep trouble and needed something beyond simple hope for an end to recession was a secondary basis for his candidacy. (In fact, in the initial wave of in-depth interviews, our subjects repeatedly noted or alluded to the need for someone who was knowledgeable about the business world and not so tainted with the political world and who could act effectively on those economic problems.) The deficit problem spanned both of those opinion categories.

In the initial weeks of his (officially exploratory) candidacy in the late winter and spring, Perot received a significant boost from the news media: he got decidedly more positive TV news coverage than the other candidates in either party. The Democracy '92 study included "overall tone of story to candidate" in the content analysis (positive, leaning positive, neutral, etc.). As three members of the Democracy '92 research team found, in the period from February 1 to June 4: "The beneficiary of the attention of the three networks was... Ross Perot, who received more favorable coverage than Bush, Buchanan, or Brown on all four networks (including CNN) and more positive coverage than Clinton on the

three broadcast networks. The novelty of Perot's campaign during the waning days of the primary and caucus season apparently occasioned far better news for him than for the bulk of his would-be competitors." And the same was the case at the local level: "In general, the local [TV news] coverage tends to be more neutral than the network coverage. . . . The local news also made fewer distinctions between the different candidates with the salient exception of Perot, who received significantly more favorable overall coverage than any of the other competitors...." (Crigler, Just, Cook, 1992, pp.11-12 and 16 respectively)

Such news coverage—in abundance—as well as the "citizens'" petition drives that got so much attention, were very positive contributors to the initial Perot image. First, speaking of "phenomenal" increases in recognition of a candidate: "A March poll reveal[ed] that more than half of respondents had never heard of Perot; by mid-June, 99% of respondents knew who he was" (Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1992, p. 8). Perot also benefitted early on from being perceived as a non-politician, as not part of "politics as usual," as the Democracy '92 focus groups and interviews showed (despite his long record as a high stakes lobbyist for his own corporate interests, etc.). One person articulated it, simply but well, to general assent, even in the "third wave" focus group conducted for Democracy '92 in Los Angeles on October 5. That is, even at the point that Perot had just "returned" to the race, and was languishing low in the polls, this citizen said: "Perot is not a politician; he doesn't dance around his answers." As noted in the beginning of the discussion of Clinton's image, the tendency of early images to last in people's minds is important to remember.

But as Perot drew even in the polls with Bush and Clinton in the late spring, news media investigations of Perot began to heat up (as is standard practice for the news media regarding "front-runners" (Robinson and Sheehan, 1983, Clancy and Robinson, 1985)). Through the second half of June and the first half of July, numerous news stories questioned Perot's assertions, his veracity, and whether there was much substance to his policy discussion beyond the deficit and aspects of the economic issue. For a prime example, CBS News, on June 22, began a three-part series of a "detailed examination" of Perot. Perot's image began to suffer. Indeed, by the first week in July, more people had an unfavorable evaluation of Perot than had a favorable one (CBS-*New York Times* poll data).

Perot "re-entered" the race on October 1. (Whether Perot intended to re-enter all along and "dropped out" principally to avoid media scrutiny, is a question *Newsweek* investigated with striking results (*Newsweek*, 1992A, pp. 30-41). Oddly, though, there was miniscule follow-up by the news media on those findings.)

Up until the first debate, only 7% of eligible voters held favorable views of Perot (CBS-*New York Times* poll data). The debates clearly had an enormous impact on the Perot image among the public, however. As Frankovic of CBS News polling summarizes: "By the time the debates ended, that [7 percent] had more than quadrupled. By the end of the debates, too, voters had regained confidence in Perot's ability to deal with the economy and viewed him as the most trustworthy of the three candidates." (Frankovic, 1993, p. 119) Further, CBS-*New York Times* polls, the night of the first debate and two days later respectively, asked the question: "In general, how did Sunday night's debate affect your opinion of [candidate X]? Did it make you think better of him, worse of him, or didn't it affect your opinion?" They found: 16% that night/14% two days later thought better of Bush; 35%/31% thought better of Clinton; but a whopping 61%/57% thought better of Perot. (Interestingly, 10% thought worse of Bush that night, but 18% thought worse of him two days later, which was the biggest change of the three in that regard. This may be a news media effect, since they routinely referred to how well Bush had to do and then to how he did not reach that goal.) (CBS-*New York Times* data) Additionally, the networks' VRS election day exit poll asked which of a list of factors helped voters decide how to vote. Sixty percent answered the debates (the second greatest response rate was 45% for "performance on talk shows") (CBS News poll data).

This combination of revived and residual positive images of Perot held by a significant percent of the public by the third week of October is an extraordinary phenomenon. It is extraordinary given what the news media had revealed about Perot in June-July, as well as the fact that he repeatedly made untrue assertions in news interviews. (For one example, on an ABC special entitled "Who Is Ross Perot," aired June 29, Peter Jennings said ABC had heard Perot had lobbied the Dallas city government for support for his and his son's airport operation. Perot flatly denied he had spent any time doing so. When ABC checked with city council members and the mayor the next day, they re-

ported Perot had been in the council chambers repeatedly to twist arms.)

The in-depth interviews conducted for the study showed considerable ambivalence about Perot. And yet, as the national polling numbers and other evidence show, in crucial respects, a significant percent of the public had a positive image of him as of the second half of October.

There are several prime explanations of how Perot managed to get a positive image established in many people's heads and to get them to ignore or reject the questionable elements of Perot and his record. First, again, was the pervasive and deep disrepute of politics as usual and the corresponding longing for a different kind of candidate. Related was an opinion, quite distinctly and repeatedly expressed, that a third candidate/choice was very desirable. For example, in the Democracy '92 focus group, final wave, conducted in Moorhead (Minn.) on October 29, participants responded to the question of "what is the most important thing that happened in the presidential election" this way:

Larry: "[I]t's the entry of Perot as a major candidate. Normally there are just two. A lot of the time you look at the two choices we have, I have not liked either one, but if you want to vote, you have to vote for one of the two. Now we've got a third choice...."

Brenda: "Not only the third choice, but he raises a whole lot of issues that the others wouldn't come up with; they'd be ignored."

Chuck: "It's a third choice that is able to be heard...."

Jolene: "I agree."

In the Winston-Salem final focus group (Oct. 28th), in response to the same question, the response was, "he gives us more choice, he makes the race more competitive," which opinion was generally shared (though, again, with uneasiness by some regarding Perot in specific). In the Los Angeles focus group on October 28, following some discussion on Perot, the moderator asked, "Does anyone have the feeling that Perot, is he the most important candidate?"

Howard: "Well, no. Having three candidates is important."

Moderator: "Whether it's Perot or somebody else?"

Howard: "Yeah, it's three.... We can give people a choice."

Again, the opinion of the others was varied as to whether Perot was the best person for a third

candidate, but the opinion was generally held that a third candidate was an important addition which enhanced choice in the election.

There was, however, clear majority or near majority opinion that Perot had added significantly to the dialogue, and hence, he did benefit from the desire for a third choice in a general sense. Perot's appearance in the debates, in conjunction with that desire for a third choice which was clearly seen as a legitimate addition to the electoral agenda, would seem to have legitimated<sup>1</sup> Perot (or re-legitimated him) as a presidential candidate. This was implicitly evident, along with the next point, which was explicitly evident from the focus groups.

A second prime reason Perot managed to retain such a positive image in many people's minds (though certainly not all) was the perception that he was a "straight talker" who brought out and dealt with issues the other candidates would not deal with. Comments from the final Winston-Salem focus group, conducted on October 28, show the general response (taken from videotape, names not clear as of this writing). Twenty-something man: "One thing Perot's got goin' for him, in the debates, when he got up on national TV..., [Bush and Clinton talked about problems we have, but] when Perot got up he said what he was going to do about it.... He told everyone what he was going to do about it and how he was going to do it." A little later a man about 60 said: "Ross Perot, he was tellin' it like it was.... They'd [Bush and Clinton] been hedgin' on the truth all the way around and he just told it the way it was." And shortly thereafter, a thirty-something woman, to nods and "I agree"s from a majority of the group: "I did feel very positive after listening to the comments that Perot made in the second and last debates. [Bush and Clinton would] just lash at each other and didn't face the issues enough. But I got more out of what Perot said than any of the others.... He didn't have any stabbing at the others, he just told it like it was." These comments were very similar to the majority sentiment in the fourth wave Moorhead focus group and to a significant minority of the fourth wave Los Angeles and Boston focus groups.

These thoughts clearly indicate the striking image of Perot many people had developed—despite the fact that a number of those same people thought their vote would not count if cast for Perot since he "had no chance to win," or they had other reservations about him. It seems clear that a significant part of the reason for those impressions stemmed from Perot's manner of speaking, which seemed to those people to be very un-

like the standard politician, Perot's manner of speech came across to many average people as folksy, plain talk, common sense, etc. at a time when people were particularly thirsting for such discourse. They also perceived him as owing no allegiance to a political party nor owing any favors to monied contributors because it was his own money financing his efforts (which is why many were not bothered by the suggestion that he was buying his standing in the election).

Clearly, another factor in the development of the Perot image noted above was positive impressions people had of the Perot spot ads and "infomercials." Now it should be noted that the networks' VRS election day exit poll found that a comparatively modest 24% of voters indicated candidates' ads "helped them decide how to vote" (compared to 60% for debates and 45% for talk show appearances). (There may be an understatement factor here for ads, as people are less likely to want to admit that ads affected their decisions than debates, for example, but that poll data gives a rough sense of peoples' perceptions of impact.) Perot's ads had particular impact, though. Frankovic reports that the CBS-*New York Times* polls found: "Voters who saw television ads said they paid the most attention to Perot's. They rated his ads as the most truthful and said the ads made them most likely to vote for Perot." (1993, pp. 127-128) Perot's ads were also rated as "the most informative" by far: 55%, vs. 20% for Clinton's, vs. 8% for Bush's. (Times Mirror poll reported in Schneider, 1992B, p. 2814)

The Democracy '92 opinion surveys in the four areas asked an open-ended question about "which ads made the biggest impression" on the respondents. Since a respondent had to remember one or more particular ads well enough to pull them out of memory and identify them in a way recognizable to the researchers (rather than being presented with a list), this was a very demanding question. The Perot 30-minute "infomercials" were easily the most frequently cited ads. And on the whole, more Perot spot ads were among the most frequently cited ads from peoples' memories in the general election than those of the other candidates.

Comments from the focus groups give deeper insight into why the Perot ads were more frequently remembered and fill out the perceptions of him as exceptionally honest and straight-forward. Following exposure to a couple of ads each from Bush, Clinton and Perot in the final Moorhead focus group, the following comments were made. Larry: "I think if we want to take those ads as they were presented to us, and if we



were to take a look and say, 'Yeah, we believe what you told us,' Perot comes right up to the top...in my viewpoint. Very, very high." Brenda: "The others come out mud slinging with no actual answers..., just a bunch of junk." Chuck: "'Cause if Perot came out and talked about, [sic] one was a letter from a, a letter from a, there was absolutely nothing political about it...." [Reference: "Purple Heart" ad.] Then Brenda raised a minor question: "A lot of emotion, which is bad." And Chuck added: "More psychology, as far as that way." But then the group returned to the theme: Bonnie: "I think just about everything I've seen, I think he comes out with a lot of very good stuff and something for us to think about [though she continues to wonder about "playing on emotions"].... And Brenda: "Yeah, actually the only really good one, I thought, [was] for Perot, was a 30-minute paid advertisement where he sat down with his—what do you call it?—cue card type things; he sat down with his charts and he gave us exact numbers. Exact numbers, right down the list...." A majority in the final Winston-Salem focus group and strong minority in the final Los Angeles focus group held similar opinions.

One person in the final Los Angeles group strikingly illustrated the power of the image Perot managed to achieve through such communications—precisely because this subject disliked him and hence, developing a positive impression of his ads was contrary to her basic candidate schema. Twice Rosaline said, "I think he's a weasel; I really do." But just after the second time, she said: "I've seen his commercials on the TV; we all have. And one thing I can say about it is the honesty in every commercial he has." And she continued, after someone else said "That's right": "And no pictures of him, just the writing—the writing on the wall." Thus, the later spots of Perot on camera were not remembered, but the scrolled writing with muted backgrounds were. Indeed, that latter comment directly demonstrates quite an impact of the form and message of the Perot "scrolling script ads": the phrase "the writing on the wall" is taken directly from the Perot ad "Grafitti," which talks about how our cities are now more of a symbol of our economic troubles and ends with: "The writing is on the wall. This is no time to waste our vote on politics as usual." This is a striking demonstration of message effect, especially since neither of the two Perot ads shown in the focus group stimulus tape were the "grafitti" ad, which was the only one to use that phrase (in keeping with the "grafitti" theme and the corresponding visual background).

All of the above is a very interesting study in

political psychology, given the facts that (1) the news media caught him in repeated untruths in general in June, July and October, that (2) ad watches in October found repeated significant inaccuracies in his ad claims, and that (3) the news media had prominently pointed out in June and July that Perot was no outsider to Washington, rather he had been a consummately effective lobbyist for his own corporate and personal interests for years and had had extraordinary access to top policy makers, including presidents. But note that the ad watches that questioned the accuracy of claims in Perot spots were primarily aired in later October, after his image was rather well fixed, as noted above. The impression that Perot "raises a whole lot of issues that the others wouldn't come up with" is also interesting given the fact that objectively, Perot offered virtually nothing of policy substance on much of any issue beyond the deficit and some aspects of the economy.

The elements of the developed Perot image discussed above are surely key to answering the question that has puzzled many. That is, why did Perot not suffer much more serious damage from the *60 Minutes* revelations regarding Ross's Perot-noid fantasy about his daughter's wedding as "the real" reason for his "pull-out" from the race (along with other apparent paranoid episodes) and his own fiasco news conference the next day. The latter was accompanied by saturation news coverage that evening. Regarding the Republican "dirty tricks" Perot belatedly claimed threatened his daughter's wedding and forced him out of the race in July, CBS News, in fact, reported (October 27 evening news show) that an internal Republican tracking poll found "more people than not believed Perot." Most people remember that Republicans have had a problem in their past regarding dirty campaign tricks, so that may well have been a factor. But further, we must keep in mind the power of an image distinctly established early on. Very significant was the fact that the *60 Minutes* story (and aftermath) did not occur until eight days before the election and after the debates and tens of millions of dollars in ads, by which time his image had been solidly built up, as was just documented.

One additional bit of theory can help explain why the *60 Minutes* story, etc. did not do more damage and how the image of Perot resisted alteration by the second half of October. Research by Lodge, et al. on how people tend to mentally process information and images, with a little extension of their conception by this analyst, suggests a further explanation of how many people resisted



accepting the questionable matters just noted and altering their judgements in a negative direction. (It should be noted that the Democracy '92 study did find a few who did remember those matters and did alter their evaluation of Perot.) Lodge, et al. detail an "impression-driven model of candidate evaluation." They report: "Impression-driven...processing occurs when a judgement is made as relevant information is encountered," which is accomplished through use of a running "evaluation counter" or "judgement tally." And so, "When exposed to new information, people can operate as 'cognitive misers' by simply retrieving the evaluation counter from memory, updating this summary tally, storing the new value in long-term memory, and then in the name of cognitive economy 'forgetting' the actual pieces of evidence that contributed to the evaluation." (Lodge, et al., 1989, p.405) They also note the existence of a "stereotyping" tendency, where people link a candidate with a general group's perceived characteristics—in Perot's case, it would be a broader category of "non-politicians" (and, in somewhat less purely positive fashion, successful business leaders).

We should add to the Lodge, et al. conception of the "summary evaluation tally" the following conception, in the case when people have substantially established an image of a candidate in their heads. When information distinctly contrary to that image is communicated to them, especially if reported by the news media and if it seems like it fits in the category of media attacking a candidate—particularly a seeming non-politician candidate—then the "judgement operator," as Lodge, et al. call the decision mechanism, will probably "not compute" the information because it does not fit the distinct "summary tally." The key element is the fact that "in the name of cognitive economy" the people tend to "'forget' the actual pieces of evidence" that have contributed to the aggregated image that is the "summary evaluation tally." This will surely be a more pronounced tendency when the image is distinctly well built up (as discussed above) and when a foundation of public opinion like the profound disgust with politics as usual functions to reinforce the existing summary evaluation. The fact that Perot spent about \$40 million in the month of October for TV ads promoting his candidacy—ads which were perceived and received as a refreshing difference—certainly helped reinforce the positive perceptions.

There is an additional conception from political psychology that offers further explanation of why the Perot image did not suffer more from

those late developments. After voters have gone through virtually the entire election period and are just days from walking into that voting booth, most tend to have reached a decision or pretty much done so, and after all the effort to sort things through, there is a natural tendency to have substantial psychological "sunk costs" in the decision; it has, in effect, become a "standing decision." Correspondingly, for new information to be accepted, it has to pass a pretty high threshold of acceptability and perceived importance—and to do so in the midst of the tremendous information "noise" of the final days (daze) of the campaign. (See, e.g., Lane and Sears, 1964 on this.)<sup>2</sup> This in combination with the previous points provides a powerful explanation for what seems at first like the unexplainable. There is still another explanatory factor, though.

A final factor in the explanation of why Perot did not suffer more damage from the *60 Minutes* story—as well as from other news media challenges of Perot in October—was surely the low opinion the general public had of a negative, hostile press corps. This allowed many to simply dismiss stories in the news media as the usual media attack. One person's comment from a Moorhead in-depth interview illustrates how this could happen; it is a good representation of the majority opinion in all the interviews and focus groups: "Same old thing over and over. They [the candidates] sling a little mud, the media picks it up and blows it all out of proportion...." As another representatively put it: "[T]he media is very pushy...; they are very pushy and they are ready to grab at anything they can, you know."

One final point is appropriate to make regarding Perot. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Perot was far from the sole, or perhaps even prime, generator of interest in the campaign: "When [Perot] left the race in July, interest stayed high and continued to climb." (Frankovic 1993, p. 127, emphasis in original) The public was interested in a campaign with many apparent twists and turns, with the many "new" venues and means of exposure to the candidates, and with the far greater opportunity to participate and have their voices heard through call-in talk shows, average people serving as questioners in the second debate, etc. They also simply felt this was a critical juncture, for economics and for politics and governance, and hence, a more important election than usual.

## Notes

1. The author thanks Marvin Kalb for particularly calling attention to the legitimating function of the debates for Perot and the importance of it for his candidacy.
2. The author would like to thank research team colleague Marion Just for suggesting this line of reasoning.

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