

# Election 2004: The War for the White House and Media Spectacle

by  
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**D**uring a media age, image and spectacle are of crucial importance in presidential campaigns. Media events like party conventions and daily photo opportunities are concocted to project positive images of the candidates and to construct daily messages to sell the candidate to the public. These events are supplemented by a full range of media advertising that often attempts both to project negative images of the oppositional candidate and positive images for the presidential aspirant that the ads seek to support. In an era of media spectacle, competing parties work hard to produce a presidential image and brand that can be successfully marketed to the public. In this article, I sketch out some of the key structural elements of the media campaign spectacle, discussing primaries and conventions, advertising and spin, and the presidential debates, illustrating them with examples from the 2004 which is emerging as one of the most highly contested and media-mediated in recent history.<sup>1</sup>

## **Spectacles of the Primary Season and the Democratic Convention**

THE PRIMARY SEASON REQUIRES THAT CANDIDATES RAISE tremendous amounts of money to finance travel through key campaign states, organize support groups in the area, and purchase television ads.<sup>2</sup> While the primaries involve numerous debates, media events, advertising, and then state-wide votes for delegates, usually a few definitive images emerge that define the various candidates, such as the negative image in 1972 of Democratic party candidate and frontrunner Edmund Muskie crying on the New Hampshire state capital steps while responding to a nasty newspaper attack on his wife, or front runner Gary Hart hitting the front pages with a sex scandal, replete with pictures, in the 1984 primaries. Michael Dukakis was arguably done in by images of him riding a tank and looking silly in an oversize helmet in the

1988 election, as well as being the subject of negative television ads that made him appear too liberal and soft on crime and defense. Bush senior, however, was undermined during the 1992 election with repeated images of his convention pledge, “Read my lips. No new taxes” after he had raised taxes and doubled the national deficit.

Beyond political primaries, spectacles can make or break campaigns for the presidency as well. In 1980, Ronald Reagan’s decisive seizing of a microphone in the New Hampshire debates and insistence that since he was paying for the debate, he would decide who would participate produced an oft-repeated image of Reagan as a strong leader; in 1984, his zinging of Walter Mondale during their presidential debates (“There you go again!”) and making light of his age arguably assured his re-election. By contrast, Al Gore’s sighs and swinging from aggressive to passive and back to aggressive behavior in the 2000 presidential debates probably lost support that might have been crucial to his election and have prevented the Bush Gang from stealing it.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2004, Democratic Party primary season, Howard Dean was for some time positively portrayed as the surprise insurgent candidate. An energetic Dean was shown nightly on television and he received affirmative publicity as front-runner in cover stories in the major national news magazines. Dean raised a record amount of money from Internet contributions and mobilized an army of young volunteers. As the time approached for the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries, however, images of an angry Dean increased and intemperate remarks, or critical positions taken out of context, made Dean look like a fire-breathing radical.<sup>4</sup> While he received significantly more media coverage than any other Democratic Party candidate in 2003, Dean received almost totally negative coverage in 2004 and his campaign came to an abrupt halt the night of the Iowa primary. Coming in a distant third, Dean tried to energize his screaming, young supporters and to catch the crowd’s attention when he emitted a loud vocal utterance, that followed an energetic recitation of the states he would campaign in. Dean’s “scream” was perhaps the most-played image of the campaign season and effectively ended his campaign.

Howard Dean was the first to energize the Democratic Party base with fierce attacks on George W. Bush and his Iraq intervention and it was clear that the base was fired up and fervently wanted Bush out of the White House and

retired to Crawford Texas. Hence, the issue of “electability” became the key issue for Democratic Party voters as the primaries began and John Kerry benefited from this concern and won primary after primary, capturing the nomination well before the convention.

Presidential elections always generate convention spectacles to sell candidate to a broader public, energize their respective party faithful, and to provide the rituals of democratic inauguration for the would-be president. The Democratic Party convention at Boston in late July 2004, attempted to present a spectacle of diversity and unity, using speakers from a variety of different ethnicities, genders, ages, social groups, and positions, all strongly affirming the candidacy of John Kerry.

During the third night of the convention, the theme switched to national security and “making America stronger,” as a bevy of former military commanders took center stage to criticize Bush administration military and national security policy and to praise the virtues of John Kerry. In recent elections, it has become increasingly important to sell the personality and biography of a candidate, so much of the final night of the convention leading up to Kerry’s acceptance speech featured Kerry’s family and friends telling his personal story and affirming his strong leadership qualities and bedrock American values.

Presenting a spectacle of the triumphant warrior, Kerry staged an event in Boston Harbor where he arrived in a boat with his “band of brothers” who had served with him in Vietnam. The ‘nam vets came on stage just before Kerry’s speech and he was introduced by Vietnam vet, former Georgia senator Max Cleland, a three-limb amputee who had been the recipient of one of the nastiest campaigns in recent US history as the Karl Rove-led Republican Political Hit Squad ran ads in the 2002 Georgia Senate race associating the highly decent and admirable Cleland with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. The mudslinging media barrage insinuated that the war veteran Cleland was “soft” on terrorism, and helped enable a mediocre Republican, Saxby Chambliss, to pull off an upset victory defeat him.

Senator Cleland rose to the occasion, making a rousing speech about his personal trust in the strength and abilities of John Kerry and offering strong arguments that America would be safer and stronger with a Kerry presidency. The usually stiff and often lugubrious Kerry was limbered up for

the occasion, beamed genuine smiles, and gave a vigorous, if sometimes too rapid, critique of Bush administration policies and articulations of his own policies on national security and domestic politics.

I generally watched the conventions on C-Span which gave unfiltered presentation of the Democratic convention spectacle, but when I did turn to the big four or news cable networks, I was generally appalled by the biased negative framing of the speeches and event. In the words of *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz:

I was going to talk about Fox News's coverage of Al Gore's speech, but the fair-and-balanced network blew off the former veep's speech in favor of Bill O'Reilly. O'Reilly interrupted his segment to toss to the Gore address for about 40 seconds, then started to rebut Gore. When Jimmy Carter took the podium, Fox joined it late and got out way early. Instead, viewers were treated to an interview with Republican activist Bill Bennett. While Carter was talking, Sean Hannity told Bennett: "I call this the reinvention convention. One of the things the Democrats want to do is create a false perception of who they are." How would Fox fans know, since they weren't able to hear Gore (the man who won the popular vote last time) or former president Carter? What happened to "we report, you decide"? While Carter continued, Hannity played the video of Teresa Heinz Kerry telling a reporter to "shove it." This is the kind of thing that makes critics question whether Fox has a Republican agenda. I've long argued that people should separate Fox's straight reporters from its opinionated talking heads. ... But virtually pulling the plug on live coverage of Gore and Carter? How about letting them speak and then ripping them, or critiquing them, or whatever. The network is supposed to be covering the convention, not just using it as a backdrop.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, the empty media spectacle of the conventions which turned them into political campaign ads has turned many viewers off and a July 28, 2004, *Reuters* report indicated that "Bare-Bones DNC Coverage Draws Lower Ratings." The four major TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox) limited coverage to one-hour of prime time television viewing and audiences declined from 2000. While viewing was up for the three cable news networks' coverage, cumulative coverage of the entire convention was

down. The second night the networks did not even offer an hour to the convention and the third night network hour that presented John Edwards' speech received 11% fewer network viewers than the Monday broadcast. Overall, in comparison to the 2000 Democratic convention viewing was down sharply on the networks, up for cable networks and down slightly as a whole compared to 2000.<sup>6</sup>

The one hour prime-time limitation meant that viewers of Network television did not get to see former Vice President Al Gore's opening night speech, or many other Democratic Party luminaries including Ted Kennedy, Wesley Clarke, Howard Dean, or Jessie Jackson. Shockingly, none of the networks run late night reprise of the highlights of the speeches of the day (with the partial exception of ABC's Nightline).

Of course, it is ultimately the responsibility of viewers and citizens to choose their own sources of information, and obviously US network television is one of the poorest sources of news and information. To be sure, there are alternatives: one of the novelties of the 2004 conventions was the presence of bloggers who presented moment-by-moment, or highly detailed, Internet coverage of the convention. Moreover, those seeking to see speeches neglected by television could often go to websites that collected the speeches, or transcripts of talks also readily found on many Internet sites. US network television is simply a national disgrace when it comes to covering US politics and a well-informed citizen cannot rely on corporate television to present the news and information needed to be a responsible citizen.

Another problem with network television coverage of US politics is what Paul Krugman calls "The Triumph of the Trivial" (*New York Times*, July 30, 2004). Krugman points out that study of transcripts of the major cable and broadcast TV networks reveals almost no coverage of John Kerry's plan "to roll back high-income tax cuts and use the money to cover most of the uninsured." Yet there was saturation coverage of Teresa Heinz Kerry's telling a newspaper reporter to "shove it." Tellingly, there was little attempt to contextualize even this event as few noted that the newspaper writer in question was a rightwing hatchet-man for Richard Mellon Scaife, who funded the attempts to smear the Clintons, and that the paper in question had repeatedly published personal attacks on Heinz-Kerry's previous husband Senator, John Heinz (R-Penn), and continually attacked her own activities, especially after she married Senator John Kerry.

Krugman also cites the frequent framing of John Edwards and John Kerry as “millionaires,” a label rarely applied to Dick Cheney and George W. Bush, although they not only are multimillionaires, but push through economic policies that benefit the economic elite. By contrast, Kerry and Edward at least claim to represent the interests of the middle class and working people. Also important, Krugman notes, are stories that are not covered at all such as the Florida Republican party call to supporters to send in absentee write-in ballots because the new voting machines lack a paper trail and cannot “verify your vote,” a position that flew in the face of Jeb Bush’s contention that the new Florida voting machines were safe and reliable.

Perhaps the most irritating and recurrent scandal of US corporate media coverage of important elections concerns the focus on the horse-race dimension and the saturation coverage of polling. In 2000, the polls were wildly off which showed George W. Bush constantly ahead of Al Gore in the popular vote whereas Gore received more than a half a million more votes than Bush. Indeed, I would like to see all national polls downplayed significantly by media coverage: the key data are figures for states in the Electoral College, so national polls tell little about where the race is really going. In summer 2004, for instance, national polls generally showed a dead-heat, and even Bush ahead on occasions, whereas the most in-depth state polls showed Kerry with a healthy lead in the necessary number of states to win the electoral college.

### **Framing Kerry**

WHILE THE DEMOCRATS WERE BATTLING IT OUT FOR THE PRESIDENCY in the primaries and then inaugurating Kerry at their convention, the Republicans were using a record amount of money raised to purchase an unprecedented number of negative TV advertisements against John Kerry. The Bush ads highlighted Kerry’s alleged flip-flopping, as he took opposed positions over the years on Iraq, national security, and other issues. In one irresponsible set of ads, Kerry was associated with Adolph Hitler, a highly ironic juxtaposition given that the Bush family earned its first major stash of money from selling its shares in Union National Bank which managed the major German firms which supported National Socialism since his grandfather Prescott Bush and great-uncle Herbert Walker, after whom Bush senior (41)

and junior (43) were named, had managed businesses and financial interests for major supporters of German fascism.<sup>7</sup>

The first set of ads promoting the Bush presidency in early 2004 featured 9/11 imagery and a resolute war-time leader in George W. Bush, insisting that the country was “Stronger, Safer,” words obviously chosen to be the mantra of Bush’s re-election campaign. There was an immediate outcry against Republican exploitation of 9/11 in a political campaign and at this time Richard Clarke, former terrorism Czar in the Clinton and Bush administration, released a book, widely publicized TV interviews, and an appearance before the 9/11 commission arguing that pre-9/11 the Bush administration had completely ignored terrorism and that Clarke had not even been able to meet with George W. Bush.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Iraq became a featured Horror Show on the nightly news as its insurgency movement intensified, the deaths of American troops and Iraqis and others working for the US-imposed government escalated, and embarrassments emerged like the Abu Ghraib Iraqi prisoner abuse and torture scandals. Reports also came out that far from being safer, the number of terror attacks globally was on the rise and major studies of the effects of Bush’s foreign policy on terrorism indicated that anti-Americanism had significantly increased and terrorists were recruiting large numbers of potentially deadly killers. Hence, the Bush administration was forced for the time being to find some new slogans to campaign for.

Meanwhile, the mainstream US corporate media had been presenting the same sort of negative framings of John Kerry that undermined Al Gore in the 2000 election. Several cable networks, including the Fox and NBC networks, seemed to trumpet daily whatever Republican National Committee talking points and negative Kerry ads were being produced. Hence, the rightwing pundits who dominate network news were parroting the Republican claim that Kerry had voted “against every major weapons system we now use in our military” (Sean Hannity, *Fox News*, 3/1/04) and Republicans liked to list thirteen to twenty-seven weapons systems that Kerry allegedly voted against. Later, it came out that in one single vote on the Pentagon’s 1991 appropriations bill Kerry voted, along with many other Republican and Democratic Senators, to cut a series of weapons systems, ones deemed obsolete or defective by then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney (see Peter Hart in the August 2004 *EXTRA*).

The Republican attack machine also claimed that Kerry had tried to cut \$1.5 billion from the intelligence budget without noting, as documented in a March 12 *Washington Post* story, that Kerry's proposed cut was smaller than the eventual \$3.8 billion cut passed by the Republican Congress that wanted to eliminate mismanaged intelligence programs that wasted excessive funds. And in an ad called "Pessimism," Bush himself declared that "I'm optimistic about America because I believe in the people of America," while the ad tried to evoke an image of Kerry and the Democrats as "pessimistic" because of their negative spin on the economy. The Kerry team countered with an ad titled "Optimists," asserting that Kerry is bullish on America, which showed that both sides could engage in foolish and empty demagoguery.

But the major Republican spin after the Democratic convention was that in nominating John Kerry and John Edwards as the candidates for their party, the Democrats were putting forth the most liberal and fourth most liberal senators of their party. The numbers were plucked from a *National Journal* article on 2003 voting records. Although it was quickly revealed that the reason for the ratings was that Kerry and Edwards had missed a number of votes while out campaigning and thus scored atypically high on the liberal scale for 2003, overall, they did not score in the top ten for lifetime vote ratings put forth by the same group. This intrusive little fact did not stop a bevy of Republican spinners from repeating over and over that the Democrats were advancing candidates more liberal than Hilary Clinton and Ted Kennedy.

The strategy of Big Lies was evident in the Republican convention that savaged John Kerry and promoted the Bush administration as the tough guy protectors against terrorism and compassionate conservatives who would take care of the country. Preparing for their opening night activities, the Republicans leaked that former NY Mayor Rudy Giuliani would try to assimilate Bush to Churchill, intoning: "Winston Churchill saw the dangers of Hitler, when his opponents and much of the press characterized him as a warmongering gadfly." While it is easy to see Bush as a warmonger it is hard to view him as Churchillian—or even as a gadfly. Giuliani presented a long, droning speech that constantly evoked 9/11 and Bush, defended Bush's Iraq policy as part of the war on terror, and generally presented Bush as a great wartime leader a la Churchill.<sup>9</sup> The



theme for the night was “A Nation of Courage” and 9/11 was evoked by speaker after speaker, a large choir sang a medley of Armed Forces theme songs, accompanied by a video of soaring jets, weapons, and US military forces, all exploited for Bush’s re-election. In a mantra-like incantation, Giuliani intoned “9/11” over and over, making for great satirical footage the next day on Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*. Less humorous were the nasty Giuliani’s attacks on John Kerry, repeating the often refuted claim that Kerry flip-flopped on the war and went from being pro-war to anti-war.

In a lackluster and surprisingly flat speech, John McCain claimed that September 11 had created a new world and that Bush had risen to the occasion as a great leader. There were incessant references, footage, and evocations of Bush and 9/11, as if Bush’s mere connection with the moment should qualify him for re-election. While McCain tried to evoke remembrances of American unity after September 11 and tried to convey that Bush had helped unify the country, the protestors outside and the large segment of the country that absolutely oppose Bush and his administration belied McCain’s banal and dishonest rhetoric. But the highlight of McCain’s speech was a reference to a “disingenuous filmmaker” who tried “to make Saddam’s Iraq look like an oasis.” Michael Moore was in the audience with a *USA Today* press pass and the delighted filmmaker stood up smiling and waving as the crowd turned to him chanting “Four more years!” Moore held up two fingers to signal that they only had two more months, and then held up his index finger and thumb in an L, a sign for loser by which Moore meant Bush, but it is doubtful that the semiotically-challenged Republican crowd got it.

Macho masculinity served as an undercurrent of the Republican convention, trying to evoke the image that Republicans are more manly than wimpy and Frenchified cosmopolitan Democrats, as war hero John McCain and tough-guy Rudy Giuliani stood center stage during Day 1 of the convention, while action-hero-turned-California-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger stood in the wings ready to swagger into the keynote position the following night. Not by accident these macho men are also among the few moderate Republicans with the party keeping its hardright power-cadre out of sight.

As Bush campaigned around the country and hit the top media venues in preparation for his triumphant entrance into the Republican convention, an

NBC interviewer caught him admitting that "I don't think you can win" the war on terror. This statement led Democrats to run for the cameras to criticize Bush for being defeatist and flip-flopping from previous predictions of victory. But after realistically conceding that the war on terror does not have an end-point and is not a conventional war, Bush flip-flopped again the next day in a speech to veterans, thumping his chest and saying "We Will Win!" to get back on the macho track that the Republican convention is promoting. It is interesting that Bush often says impolitic things off the cuff, admitting, for example, that Iraq is a "catastrophic success" and that "miscalculations" were made in his Iraq policy. The part about Iraq as "catastrophic" is certainly true and one hopes that during the campaign Bush will be Bush and the public can see him as a dangerous incompetent and rightwing ideologue.

The motif for the second night of the Republican convention was "People of Compassion" with Karen Hughes and Karl Rove trying to orchestrate a spectacle that would resell "compassionate conservatism," a product that had perhaps produced some votes in 2000, but which had been roundly undercut by the Bush administration hardright extremism and militarism. Speakers included Education Secretary Rod Paige (whose Houston School District had been revealed to have fix numbers of students taking tests to illicitly boost their scores), and Senators Bill Frist (Tenn) and Elizabeth Dole (NC) to defend the Republican platforms on (severely limiting) stem-cell research, opposing gay marriage, and other not so palatable aspects of the Republican platform that had been approved earlier in the evening. Elizabeth Dole's husband had disgraced himself that week by brazenly smearing Kerry's war record and the president's father, the former president had said he trusted Bob Dole's word, even though Dole had misspoken in attacking Kerry. As noted, Dole and Bush senior's intervention made it clear that the smear campaign against Kerry was orchestrated and supported by the top echelons of the Republican Party.

Oddly, for the second night in a row the main speakers provided no reasons whatsoever to vote for George W. Bush. While during the first night, speakers such as McCain and Giuliani stressed Bush's determination, resolve, and what Kerry calls his "stubbornness," evoking incessantly Bush's alleged "leadership" after 9/11, during the second night Arnold Schwarzenegger reprised the manly evocations of the previous night of how Bush was a great leader, while Bush's daughters and wife tried to project a

more compassionate side of “Bushie.” Many praised Arnold Schwarzenegger’s speech as the best of the convention so far, but, like the other speakers, he did not have one positive thing to say about anything specific that Bush had accomplished or anything specific that he would do, except keep fighting terrorists. With Arnold generally puffing himself, extolling how great America is, and zapping Democrats as “Girlie Men” whose convention should have been called “True Lies,” the only thing he managed to say about Bush sounded like a Nazi speech for Hitler, as Arnold gushed about Bush's vision, will, courage, perseverance, steadfastness, and capacity for action, gushing “He’s a man of inner strength. He is a leader who doesn’t flinch, doesn’t waver, and does not back down.” Heil Bush!

Watching the ecstatic Republican audiences eating up Arnold's empty banalities indeed looked like a fascist rally. After Arnold’s entertainment, the Republicans turned to comedy and soft-selling promotion of Bush with the highly anticipated convention debut of his twins Jenna and Barbara. The twins joked how they have been working hard to say out of the headlines (i.e. out of jail for their drinking and wild partying) and then put on a failed stand-up comic routine, telling jokes about popular culture, sex and Barbara Bush senior, how their parents call each other Bushie, and other silly irrelevancies. A *Los Angeles Times* commentator wrote: "The Bush daughters, fresh from their boozing this week at the MTV Video Music Awards in Miami, came onstage at the Republican National Convention on Tuesday night and introduced a new strategy in the war on terrorism: giggling. The strategy Tuesday, apparently, was to have sisters Jenna and Barbara humanize and soften the grim-faced Politburo image that dogs the Bush-Cheney campaign, which hasn't made much of an effort to court those young Americans who call it a good day if they've remembered to TiVo 'The Simple Life.' So here they were, girlie and giggly and glammed-up (Jenna in some kind of Juicy couture-looking track suit top over white pants, Barbara in a black cocktail dress)."<sup>10</sup>

The twins then introduced their father who was attending a local softball game in the boonies of Pennsylvania and as the game proceeded behind him, George introduced his wife Laura and the crowd went wild. Bush’s wife Laura is believed to be one of his strongest campaign assets and she took center stage to tell the world how wonderful her husband was, to defend the war in Iraq for liberating women, and to advocate a “compassionate stem-cell research” that maintained “respect for life.”

While the “compassionate conservative” Republicans had their love-fest in Madison Square Garden, the mean streets of Manhattan were occupied by militarist police who had arrested hundreds and were desperately trying to keep mobs of young protesters from harassing Republicans on the way to Madison Square Garden, occupying hotels where Republican delegates were in residence, or attacking rightwing Bush-Cheney-connected corporations like Halliburton, the Carlyle Group, and Fox TV. A loose coalition of groups calling themselves A31 had promised a day of activism and non-violent protests on August 31. By the end of the day, over 1000 had been arrested, bringing the total arrests to over 1,600.

One group, the pacifist War Resisters League, planned for a “day of action” against Bush’s war policies, including a march from Ground Zero to Madison Square and then a planned “die-in” to demonstrate the effects of Bush’s wars. Accompanied by the newly formed Iraq Veterans Against the War, antiwar protesters were a prime target for the police, and 200 were arrested before the march even started. When another protest group was ordered away from Union Square, they were threatened with arrest by a policeman in front of a phalanx of shield-bearing officers. The crowd chanted “Go Arrest Bush” and then switched to “the police deserve a raise!” The group then marched 1,000 strong toward Madison Square Garden and police swarmed in and arrested 200 who refused to move when police surrounded them and blocked their entry. As Republicans entered the convention site, police helicopters flew overhead, cadres of cops with helmets and sticks stood ready for action, troopers on horseback paraded around the Garden, and NY looked like a police state.

In addition to having police in armed phalanxes of storm-troopers, formations on horseback, and squads of cars, buses, and motorcycles, there were plainclothesmen within the protest groups, some of whom had been police infiltrators and had the groups targeted for arrest. Wags speculated that the tens of thousands of armed police constituted the fourth largest military force in the world. Police deployed hi-tech surveillance cameras that provided panoptic views of every street and site in the protest area and had cadres of armed and dangerous forces sweeping upon the demonstrators when deemed appropriate, providing a show of overwhelming force as if New York were Baghdad. Using giant nets to literally scoop up protesters, the nets also captured many seniors who were just out on the streets

observing the spectacle, as well as catching reporters, and tourists, who the police released if they so choose to do so, or often not.

Indeed, the Republican convention had been preceded by some of the biggest demonstrations in US history with as many as half a million protestors demonstrating against the Bush administration in a march before the convention started. Throughout the week, there were daily protests and arrests, infiltrations of the protestors into the convention and more protests and arrests. Perhaps never before had so many people in a city been so hostile to a political party having a convention in its metropolis and never before had such widespread and continuous demonstrations been seen at a US political convention, testifying to the utter hatred of the Bush administration and opposition to its policies. NY was like an armed camp and delegates were forced to travel through the city with police escorts.

The speeches by Bush and Cheney were anticlimactic and contained the same attacks they'd been mounting for weeks against Kerry. They could not really justify their Iraq war except by making it a main pillar of the "war on terror." September 11 was evoked constantly and Kerry's comment on the Iraq policy in the presidential debate probably summed up most concisely the thrust of the Republican plan for the second Bush administration: "more of the same."

### **The Debates**

IN A US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, THE DEBATES ARE often the crucial determinant of an election. Although both parties work to forge messages and consensus during the primaries, present their candidate and program in a convention spectacle, bombard the airwaves with ads, organize daily media events, deluge the press and public with daily messages, and put together support groups who telephone, write, email, and text-message to try to win voters, the debates have focused national attention more than any other element in recent US presidential elections.

In the lead up to the debate, there had been a major media spectacle when CBS broadcast a segment of *60 Minutes* that produced documents which suggested the George W. Bush had indeed gone AWOL during his Texas

National Air Guard service, had been disciplined by superior officers, and was given an honorable discharge under intense pressure. It soon appeared, however, that the documents were forged and media focus was on the CBS report rather than the facts of Bush's military service.

The long-awaited moment of the Presidential debates finally came on October 1 in Coral Gables, Florida and it turned out to be one of the major spectacles of recent presidential politics. An eager-beaver Bushie strode out first and went on the offensive, walking so fast that he met Kerry beyond the midpoint of the stage, in front of Mr. Kerry's lectern. Kerry then seized the moment, leaned over to chitchat with Bush, with his 6'4" frame overwhelming the 5' 10" Bush. Kerry managed to grab Little George's hand and hold on and continue bantering, as a flustered Bush tried to break away and return to his lectern.

John Kerry proved that he is one of the best debaters in the world, scoring point after point against the highly mediocre George W. Bush. Kerry was forceful, articulate and presidential, while Bush was defensive, confused, petulant, pouty, peevish, whiney, and inarticulate. While Kerry criticized Bush's "colossal mistake" on Iraq and other blunders, the split-screen revealed the president to be frowning, shaking his head, blinking, squirming, angry, nervously scoffing water, and confused, obviously knocked off stride while hearing criticisms that somehow his handlers appeared to have previously protected him from. Overwhelmed by Kerry's continual critique of Bush's record and proposal of far more intelligent policies, Bush just didn't know how to deal with it. A couple of times Bush interrupted as if he was going to make a killer point and then blanked out with his characteristic deer in the headlights empty look, and after painful silences sputtered out his "message" of the night, "I'm firm, resolute," [Kerry] "changes his position," "shouldn't send mixed messages" (Bush used this about ten times), "stay on course," and so on.

More than ten times, Bush emphasized how much "work" Iraq is and, by extension the presidency, and by the end of the debate it was obvious that forming sentences defending his policies and communicating coherent positions was too much for the slacker president, who looked like he was ready for another long vacation in Crawford, Texas. It was clear from his debate performance that Bush does not speak in the form of argument or

even sentences, but sputters code words to his base. Often, he would hunch up his shoulders, lean over the lectern, and try to speak directly to the camera, but usually repeated his set “message” lines and didn’t really communicate anything of particular substance or interest, instead looking rather smallish in a scrunched-up and desperate attempt to say something memorable.

Hence, on the issue of style vs. substance that is often the focus of pundit discussion, Bush was terrible on style and weak on substance, whereas Kerry scored big on both. While there was worry that the rigid debate format and 32-pages of rules would inhibit spontaneous exchange and lead both candidates to simply regurgitate their standard stump speeches, in fact the exchanges were often dramatic, the differences in position and style were striking, and both candidates clearly revealed their opposed positions and personalities. Most observers found the debate to be an interesting and engrossing affair (although for Bush fans it must have been rather painful as the magisterial Kerry dominated the scene and Bush appeared not at all ready for prime time, much less the presidency).

Iraq dominated the debate and from the beginning Kerry put Bush on the defensive. Kerry rattled off all the high-level military officers who supported him, and soon after was asked by the moderator to indicate what “colossal errors of judgment” President Bush made. Kerry hit his stride, criticizing Bush’s failure to get UN approval and significant allies involved in the Iraq venture, only going to the UN after his father’s top advisors insisted on it, promising to go to war only as a “last resort,” and rushing to battle without a plan to win.

As commentary on the debates began rapidly circulating in the media, most pundits admitted that Bush had a bad night and Kerry a good one, although some of the more mendacious Republican spinners just couldn’t help not telling Big, Bold, and Brazen Lies. Fox News host Sean Hannity said of Bush, “I’ve never seen him more passionate, more on message, more articulate.” And in Chris Sullentrop’s summary: “Karl Rove must have known things didn’t go well when the *New York Post* asked him whether this was the worst debate of President Bush’s life. No, Rove insisted. This was one of the president’s best debates, and one of John Kerry’s worst. “Really?” asked the reporter, Vince Morris. “You can say that with a straight face?”

In fact, it had been Bush's worse debate ever and while many had thought that Gore had beaten Bush on debating points and substance in the first presidential debate in Election 2000, but that Bush had won on style and likeability, it would be hard to make this claim in the opening 2004 debate. Bush was whiney, petulant, and not particularly likeable. The Democratic National Committee released a tape the next day showing Bush's reaction shots and never before has a presidential candidate looked so -- un-presidential.

Of course, the Republican spin machine was working overtime to marshal arguments against Kerry and to insist that Bush had made the stronger case. Yet the extent of Bush's poor performance was striking and noted in the media the next day, even by Bush supporters. It was astonishing that Bush was not better prepared and had no memorable lines to zing at Kerry and that he had performed so poorly, arguably the worst performance in a recorded presidential debate in memory. Sidney Blumenthal argued the next day that Kerry effectively deconstructed Bush's epistemology of certainty and put on display Bush's intellectual vacuity and rigidity. As Kerry hammered Bush on position after position, he would stammer and say "I am certain that..." "I know that..." and other phrases of absolutism, while Kerry zinged him by arguing that "It's one thing to be certain, but you can be certain and be wrong." In Blumenthal's words, "For Bush, certainty equals strength. Kerry responded with a devastating deconstruction of Bush's epistemology. Nothing like this critique of pure reason has ever been heard in a presidential debate."

The first Vice-Presidential debate took place in Coral Gables, Florida on October 5 and, once again, it was a major spectacle with the old and wizened Dick Cheney attacking the young and vigorous Democratic candidate John Edwards' lack of experience and poor record, as well as fiercely assaulting the qualifications and record of John Kerry. Edwards retorted with a passionate defense of Kerry, sharp attacks on Bush administration policy in Iraq and the war on terror, and advocacy of Kerry-Edwards administration solutions to the domestic and foreign policy problems generated by the Cheney-Bush administration. There had not been in recent times in a presidential campaign debate such acrid personal attacks, sharp articulations of policy differences, and yield-no-quarter attacks on opponents. Both candidates fought so fiercely, however, that both seemed out of energy and arguments in the last thirty minutes or so of



the debate. Hence, it was not a decisive victory for one side or another as most considered the first debate to be for Kerry.

### Concluding Comments

THE MEDIA HAVE BEEN A MAJOR DETERMINANT OF THE 2000 election campaign so far. Negative media coverage of the Bush administration during the 9/11 commission hearings, the Abu Ghraib scandal, and daily disasters in Iraq had created negative media images of the Bush administration that the Kerry campaign exploited to main a lead in most polls until the period leading up to the Republican convention in August when Kerry was hit by a wave of negative ads in the Swift Boat Veterans for Bush attacks and the Republican convention that savaged Kerry for an entire week. Kerry regained momentum with what was considered a major victory in the presidential debate and as I conclude this study in early October, most polls have the candidates in a statistical dead heat. So far, the momentum of the campaign has been media driven and it remains to be seen if major media spectacles intervene to decisively tip the election one way or another, or if the nitty-gritty work of political organization and efforts to get out the vote will be decisive.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This text extracts from a forthcoming book to be published by Paradigm Press, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles*. Thanks to Dean Birkenkamp for support with this project, to Rhonda Hammer for discussion and editing of the text, and Steve Bronner for encouraging me to produce a text for *Logos*.

<sup>2</sup> By August 2004, a record billion dollars had been raised by both candidates, double the amount for the previous year. See Thomas B. Edsall, "Fundraising Doubles the Pace of 2000." *Washington Post*, August 21, 2004: A01.

<sup>3</sup> For details, see Douglas Kellner, *Grand Theft 2000*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Many media pundits were cool for Dean from the beginning although he got much good press when the long-shot contender became a surprise front-runner. On the very negative coverage of the Dean campaign by the

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media punditry and corporate networks, see Peter Hart, "Target Dean. Re-establishing the establishment." *Extra!* (March-April 2004: 13-18).

<sup>5</sup> See Howard Kurtz at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/columns/kurtzhoward/>.

<sup>6</sup> See *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2004: E23.

<sup>7</sup> For documentation of Bush family support for key businesses involved with financing German fascism, see John Loftus and Daniel Aarons, *The Secret War Against the Jews*. New York: Saint Martins Griffin, 1994, 356-360, and Kevin Philips, *American Dynasty. Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*. New York: Viking, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Nagourney, "Giuliani Lauds Bush's Leadership on Terror as Convention Opens," *New York Times*, 31, 2004 <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/31/politics/campaign/31convene.html>

<sup>10</sup> Paul Brownfield, "No Joke, Twins' Act Needs Work," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 2004: A24.

The 2004 United States presidential election was the 55th quadrennial presidential election, held on Tuesday, November 2, 2004. The incumbent Republican President George W. Bush and his running mate Vice President Dick Cheney were elected to a second term, defeating the Democratic ticket of John Kerry, a United States Senator from Massachusetts and his running mate John Edwards, a United States Senator from North Carolina. Notably, it is to date the only presidential election since 1988 in which the Introduction: Media Spectacle and Politics in the Contemporary Era Chapter 1: Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election Chapter 2: 9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Perpetual War Chapter 3: The Axis of Evil, Preemptive Strikes, and the Road to Iraq Chapter 4: Pandora's Box: Bush's War on Iraq Chapter 5: Media Spectacle and Election 2004 Chapter 6: Decision. 2004: The War for the White House Conclusion: The Media, Elections, and the Crisis of Democracy. [View More](#). [View Less](#). [Reviews](#). "One of the great books on media and politics in recent years. Kellner provides a US elections 2004. This article is more than 16 years old. No better news. Philip James." The man who has energised Democrats demoralised by the loss of the White House and the Senate in successive election cycles certainly succeeded in turning out the vote on Monday night, double the number who took part in 2000. They just weren't voting for him. Doubts about his temperament were only confirmed by his concession speech." Edwards cannily avoided the war as a major theme of his campaign, rightly recognising it as a no-win issue for any Democrat wanting to take on George Bush in the fall. And that recognition among the voters above all else is what redrew the contest Monday night. In a media age, image and spectacle are of crucial importance in presidential campaigns. Media events like party conventions and daily photo opportunities are concocted to project positive images of the candidates and to construct daily messages to sell the candidate to the public. These events are supplemented by a full range of media advertising that often attempts both to project negative images of the oppositional candidate and positive images for the presidential aspirant that the ads seek to support. In an era of media spectacle, competing parties work hard to produce a presidential i