

20. TYPECASTING THE CANDIDATES

Immediately following the 2000 Democratic National Convention, Albert Gore, Jr., was campaigning down the Mississippi River on the river boat *Mark Twain*. The newly-nominated Democratic candidate for President spied a band, with musical instruments at the ready, assembled along the edge of the river. Thinking he was in Wisconsin, Al Gore asked if the band could play “On Wisconsin,” the University of Wisconsin fight song.

“This is Iowa,” bystanders on the riverbank shouted back.

It could have been a major campaign gaffe for Al Gore. Candidates for President of the United States are supposed to be sharp enough to know where they are at any given moment, particularly during a campaign appearance. Getting the name of the city or county you are in wrong, or mispronouncing the name of a leading local politician, has always been taken by the press as a sign that a politician does not really know what he or she is doing.

But Al Gore received no punishment from the news media for confusing Iowa with Wisconsin. The explanation was simple. The reporters and television commentators had *typecast* Gore as “smart” rather than “stupid.” His failure to distinguish one Mississippi River state from another did not fit the overall image of Gore that the news media had decided, collectively, to sell to the public.

If George W. Bush had made such a mistake - thinking he was in Wisconsin when he actually was in Iowa - the news media would have been all over him for it. Why? The press had typecast the Republican nominee for President in 2000 as a “dim bulb,” a candidate who mixed up his words frequently and often seemed to get confused about what it was he was trying to say.¹

One time George W. Bush used “cuff links” when he meant “handcuffs.” On another occasion, he garbled his words by stating that “Republicans understand the importance of *bondage* between a mother and a child.” What he meant, of course, was “bonding” between a mother and a child. In another Bush speech, the word “vital” came out as “vile.” Talking to a reporter, Bush remarked that candidates sometimes have to let off steam and “vet.” The reporter pointed out to Bush that he meant to say “vent.”²

Bush’s tendency to garble his words had a way of supplanting more important issues. A case in point occurred when the Republican National Committee released a Bush television ad that, for a fraction of a second, flashed the word “Rats” on the screen. The press and the Democrats immediately charged the Bush campaign with using *subliminal* advertising, which is the attempt to plant negative messages in the television viewer’s mind (“The Democrats are Rats!”) by flashing negative words just for a millisecond on the television screen (“Rats.”).

Bush immediately denied there was any effort on his part to use subliminal advertising on voters. But he characteristically mispronounced the key word and said “subliminable.” That fit the news media typecasting of Bush as a word mangler perfectly, and the flap over “subliminable” almost became a bigger story than the use of the word “Rats” in a TV ad in the first place.

Bush’s ability to get things jumbled up in his brain became so commonplace that reporters stopped paying attention to it. Late in the campaign, speaking in Missouri, Bush attacked Al Gore for being a big-government liberal and then shouted: “They want the federal government controlling Social Security like it’s some kind of federal program!” Of course, Social Security has been a federal program ever since it was created in the 1930s. Much of the news media ignored this clear error of fact as just another “Bush-ism.”³

One need not get upset that the reporters and commentators were picking on George W. Bush and letting Albert Gore, Jr., out free. The same reporters who insisted on typecasting Bush as unable to think and talk straight were just as unkind to Al Gore, typecasting him as prone to exaggeration and shading the truth. There were repeated references to the infamous 1996 Democratic Party fund raiser at a Buddhist Temple in California. Gore spoke at the event, and at first denied to the press that there was any fund raising. There also were frequent news-media

references to Gore's highly questionable assertion that he had invented the Internet.

So the reporters were ready to pounce when Al Gore said his mother-in-law was required to pay more for her arthritis medicine, called Lodine, than it cost Gore to give the same medicine to his dog, named Shiloh. The basic facts of the story were true, but those facts came from a Democratic Party report in Congress and were badly misrepresented by Gore. The press also made the point that Gore gave campaign speeches condemning violence and mayhem in movies and on television, but then he turned around and raised as much money as possible from wealthy contributors in the entertainment world.⁴

Al Gore's most damaging embellishment came when he told the story of his mother singing him a Labor Movement song as a lullaby when he was a small child. The news hounds, primed to check extra carefully anything Gore had to say, discovered that the labor anthem was not composed until Gore was in his late twenties.

No one of Gore's overstatements was big a deal. But the combination of them all, ballyhooed strongly by the press, began taking a toll on Gore's campaign for the White House.

So, as a result of news media typecasting, the 2000 presidential race began to look like a contest between George W. Bush, a "verbal bumbler," and Albert

Gore, Jr., a “serial exaggerator.”

Not that the two candidates did not work hard to present positive images and issues to the voting public. Bush was well aware that the nation was tired of the character scandals of the Clinton-Gore years, a phenomenon referred to as “Clinton fatigue.” Bush therefore promised a clean presidency that would avoid personal scandal. And, hoping to take the sharp bite out of the rigid conservative philosophy that seemed to dominate Republicans in Congress, Bush hammered away on his favorite theme of being a “compassionate conservative.”

Gore, for his part, continue to steadfastly claim that he would fight for the American middle class. He gained some ground on Bush by pledging to see that the U.S. Government would help the nation’s senior citizens with rapidly rising drug costs.

The result of all this negative typecasting by the press was a presidential campaign in which there was very little movement. Al Gore had pulled even with George W. Bush in the public opinion polls shortly after planting that big kiss on Tipper Gore at the 2000 Democratic National Convention. And the race remained a dead heat as August turned into September and then to October. The reporters kept playing “gotcha” with the candidates, playing up Bush’s fumbling and emphasizing Gore’s repeated tendency to claim too much for himself. But not one

of the mini-gaffes by the two candidates was enough to shift the polls dramatically in one direction or the other.⁵

Suddenly it was time for the year 2000 presidential campaign debates. Perhaps this traditional series of face-to-face confrontations between the two candidates, before a large national television audience, would give George W. Bush or Albert Gore, Jr., a chance to break out of the tie and gain a decisive lead in the polls.

Endnotes - Chapter 20:

1. A number of political scientists referred to the press using recurring themes in campaign coverage as “framing.” See Marjorie Randon Hershey, “The Campaign And The Media,” in Gerald M. Pomper, et. al., *The Election of 2000* (New York, NY: Chatham House, 2001), p.57.
2. “Gore’s Summer Surprise,” *Newsweek*, November 20, 2000, pp.86-88.
3. “Calling All Swing States,” *Newsweek*, November 20, 2000, p. 120B.
4. For two of the harder hits on Gore’s truthfulness by political columnists, see Tony Snow, “Fabrication and Exploitation,” *Denver Post*, September 24, 2000, p. 2L, and Kathleen Parker, “The Serial Exaggerator,” *Denver Post*, October 15, 2000, p. 2I.
5. For examples of the sort of stories reporters were writing following the 2000 national conventions, see Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, “A Static Campaign,” *Denver Post*, August 22, 2000, p. 9B, and David Broder, “Virtual Deadlock Makes For Great Presidential Campaign,” *Denver Post*, August 31, 2000, p. 11B.