

President-Elect Donald Trump: A Master of Performance

As access to information at our fingertips continues to rapidly increase, it seems commercialism and American innovation have been woven tighter together now more than ever before. Although an emphasis on maximizing profit is not necessarily a bad thing, it can quickly open the door to doing so at quality's expense. And while social media has been able to successfully create platforms for shedding light on the negatives attached to American commercialism; it simultaneously provided the perfect stage for Donald Trump, a businessman with four bankruptcies attached to his career that produced almost \$5.5 billion in debt, to win a presidential election (Carroll, Youngman). At the heart of commercialism, advertising is the blood pumping through that keeps it all in motion. Trump's campaign ads, if not initially published through the internet, swiftly became just as available to watch anytime from anywhere immediately upon their release. Trump's campaign, especially within its advertisements, was so rampant in perverting the idea of American exceptionalism that his supporters who were well aware of his previous shortcomings from the start did not care. His popularity soared among what supporters often refer to as the "silent majority" for one all-encompassing reason: he wants to "make America great again". What better choice for campaign dogma than rhetoric just patriotic and vague enough to stir the pot with a large-scale group of Americans who feel rightfully frustrated at their government in general? Clearly it was this style of rhetoric based in pathos that afforded Trump the freedom to totally disregard logos and the control to maintain a façade of ethos just as terrifying as it is fascinating.

A political ad database from newrepublic.com currently houses every advertisement from each candidate during the 2016 presidential election. An efficient look through these clips reveals that Trump's campaign produced significantly less commercial ads than his greatest

opponent Hillary Clinton (he averaged about one ad per two weeks, she averaged a little over three per two weeks). Additionally, though the margin was much smaller, Trump's number of ads over the course of the election were even less than that of Bernie Sanders with an average of one and a half ads per two weeks and with the fact that he did not even make it past the primaries. Irony is at work in Trump's victory: a man who has arguably built his fortune on commercialism has won through a certain perceived quality over quantity. Narrowed from the approximately forty-five advertisement clips for Trump during the election cycle, a total of five minutes over six ads will be explored following this paragraph in order to provide transparency behind the success of the rhetoric used. In order to achieve a more overall view of his campaign the ads analyzed are taken from throughout its entirety; though its entirety did not even begin until January 2016, unlike his opponents' ads who started as early as the summer of 2015. The selected advertisements are "Voters Speak" aired February 3rd, "Washington is Broken" aired April 21st, "America Soaring" aired August 1st, "Movement" aired September 20th, "Consumer Benefit" aired October 6th, and finally "Donald Trump's Argument for America" aired November 4th.

"Voters Speak" and "Washington is Broken" both premiered on a smaller scale before Trump clinched the Republican nomination in July. "Voters Speak" originally aired on television in the states of New Hampshire and South Carolina, while "Washington is Broken" aired on television only in the state of Pennsylvania. These are all states which, if won in the past, have equated to an automatic ticket to the nomination. The strategy then for zeroing in on areas of importance for persuasion is obvious; eventually anyone will have access to that same message, but these groups specifically hold a higher leverage in terms of influence and therefore should receive an extra push in his direction. "Voters Speak" features a diverse array of "Trump

supporters” making commentary over clips and images of themselves, of Trump speaking at rallies and of the crowds at such rallies. The commentary includes an African American man interested to hear Trump’s “business plan”, white women and an older white man saying Trump “tells it like it is”, an “international student” saying Trump speaks the truth, and a younger Hispanic woman saying “he wants to make America great again and that’s what I want, too”. The final few seconds are solely clips of Trump at rallies while he can be heard commenting over them “We have a country that we're proud of and that we love and that we're not going to lose. There is an assault on everything that we stand for, and we're going to stop the assault. We will make America great again”. One of the strongest arguments against Trump falls under the undeniable reminders of his history with arguably racist and sexist rhetoric and yet, much like this early advertisement, almost all of his commercial ads make a point of featuring very diverse players for one target reason: to aid in forming a specific narrative that would subconsciously dilute the accusations against him. This narrative snowballed as it coupled alongside the ideas Trump raised surrounding “an assault” on America’s prosperity where the attacker is nothing more than politics by and large up to this point. In an article for the American Theatre magazine entitled “The Theatre of Trump,” author Mike Daisey discusses how the president-elect was able to turn one vague truth into a campaign’s worth of superficial credibility. He explains that “when done artfully the value of [a] central truth permeates the whole, so that the entire bundle is perceived as being true” (Daisey). This practice could not be more apparent in the “Washington is Broken” ad which features Trump, alone and centered directly facing the camera, with an enthusiastic use of hand motions. His thirty second monologue includes phrases like “too many politicians are totally controlled by special interests and lobbyists”, and “we’ll cut taxes for the middle class... bring back jobs, save social security... end illegal immigration... strengthen our

military”, and of course “make America great again”. Identical to Trump’s catchphrase, his promises only appear satisfying because of their ambiguity and the nearly universal principles they are attached to. Many Americans from all sides of the political spectrum can oftentimes come to an agreement on the fact that there is a desire for change from where we have been, it’s when the specifics of that change are broken down that the division occurs.

“America Soaring”, “Movement”, and “Consumer Benefit” premiered through the large-scale channels of YouTube for the first and national television for both of the latter. These advertisements are a general consensus of the voiceover-esque ads that were produced after Trump won the Republican nomination. All three represent an immersion of the Republican Party into Trump’s performance as they quite pointedly follow and glorify his delivery method. “America Soaring” again features flashes between images and clips of diverse “average” citizens working an array of skilled or factory jobs. A melancholy tune plays through voiceover commentary discussing how Americans have witnessed their jobs being shipped “thousands of miles away”. As the commentary shifts to phrases like “It will be American steel that rebuilds our inner cities”, “It will be American hands, American workers that will make this country great again”, and “We’re going to make America great again for everyone,” the music becomes exciting and the ad that originally began in black and white slowly but surely shifts into full color. The word “America” in some form or another is reiterated in an average of every sentence for the majority of the clip. Sasha Abramsky, a writer for Nation, hints at why an ad such as this one could garner positive results in her article “Tying Trump Down”. She explains a valid point behind all forms of polarization discussing how “it’s about making working [white] folks look at what’s happened to them and providing simple answers – pointing to a community and saying, ‘That’s your problem’” (Abramsky). So it should be no surprise that ambiguous promises would

come with ambiguous solutions such as putting a target of the middle classes' rage at a terrible economy over the heads of... big government in general allowing jobs to become so outsourced. The pathway to a perfect performance of pathos continues with "Movement" and "Consumer Benefit," two additional ads featuring solely voiceovers, take it up a notch in terms of commercial-like quality with the use of key words and texts or phrases appearing across the screen as they are spoken. "Movement" features the following key words: movement, success, dreaming big, freedom, future, together, great. These words appear over clips of packed rallies, Trump shaking hands with "hard-working" Americans, flags, soldiers coming home, and a little girl writing U-S-A on a sidewalk with chalk. Notable moments include flashing to an outdated clip of the Clintons as "leaving the past behind" is spoken and flashing through images and clips of diverse American families and individuals as "Trump's priority... you" is spoken. Most sentences comprise no more than four or five words with phrases like "It's a movement, not a campaign", "Doing what others called impossible", "United for families, jobs, country", and "Changing our future". Barely two weeks later "Consumer Benefit" aired, adding a sprinkle of abstruse specifics that was apparently icing on the cake of confirmation Trump supporters were eagerly awaiting to swallow. The stock photo clips and images of diversity are on full blast behind main points appearing across the screen after an introductory "What does electing Donald Trump mean for you?" This ad features mostly families with the following voiceover: "Families making \$60,000 a year, you get a 20 percent tax rate reduction. Working moms, you get paid maternity leave and an average \$5,000 childcare tax reduction. Business owners, your taxes get cut from 35 to 15 percent so you can expand and create more jobs. Donald Trump, prosperity for you. America, great again". Rather than dive deeper, the ad makes extensive claims in Trump's name in a mere thirty seconds and then ends with no further explanation. Writer for The New

Yorker, Jelani Cobb, argues that it is the broad misjudgment of conservatives by the Republican Party which has led them into feeding from the hands of Donald Trump. In a recent article “Donald Trump and the Death of American Nationalism,” Cobb states that Trump’s success is partly to blame on the “G.O.P. pandering to a base whose dilated pupils the Party mistook for gullibility, not abject, irrational fear that would send those voters scurrying to the nearest authoritarian savior they could find” (Cobb). The irony thickens once more as a completely inexperienced candidate for office so deliberately makes sure everyone knows he isn’t a politician, yet ends up approving and making the far-fetched promises that are typically associated with... politicians.

The final advertisement up for analysis, and one of the last of Trump’s ads to appear before the election, “Donald Trump’s Argument for America” is a full, again oddly overly diverse, two minutes. Trump’s voice is speaking over flashing images for the entirety of the ad. Visuals blur in and out like a television signal going down and include Trump rallies, web articles featuring pictures of opponents, officials walking in government office hallways, the American flag, empty and abandoned factories and buildings, and finally a flash between several “disappointed looking” citizens. Throughout the monologue, anytime “groups responsible” or an echo is said, there are images and clips of Obama, the Clintons, and other notable democrats in office. The advertisement concludes with the spoken monologue becoming no longer a voiceover, but rather Trump actually speaking to an extremely large, packed crowd. To summarize, Trump’s text included the reiteration of making America great again by fixing a failed and broken political establishment. The rhetoric essentially blames all of America’s modern problems on corrupt politics and offers only one narrowed solution: voting for Donald Trump. Time magazine gives clarity on the effectiveness of Trump’s campaign with the

exploration of reasons behind the final results of the 2016 presidential election in an article entitled “How He Won” by Zeke J. Miller. Miller argues that Trump’s campaign team “had no better foil than Clinton” when it came to taking advantage of the popular distrust towards politicians and the “nation’s elites” (Miller). And so the performance began. Donald Trump inexplicably was able to act as a candidate against politics and the billionaire class in ways that no other person in political office would ever dare. He was able to say the things that surely many politicians have thought for years, but understood as too risky in terms of their integrity to the public eye. Trump’s strength was obtained and multiplied through his ability to say what no one else could, even certain truths the whole do not want to acknowledge. However, despite all of this, one scary truth remains: all along he was irrefutably a member of the billionaire “elites” fighting against a corrupt political system that he himself has been benefiting from since day one.

Trump’s electoral victory has arguably changed the rules to the game of political rhetoric; whether it be through a haunting, recycled ideology of America’s past or a new one that equates fame to power under the right circumstances. Not unlike the energy of his own campaign advertisements, Trump’s preference towards his inaugural ceremony was to keep it short and vague in order to better assert himself to his target audience. Time magazine breaks down the significance behind the presidential inauguration in an article titled “Trump’s American Vision”. This piece reiterates Ronald Reagan’s reference to the ceremony as “both commonplace and nothing less than a miracle”. It explains that the ritual of Inauguration Day “honors and strengthens the conviction that what we share is bigger than what divides us, and what we decide, in our elections, matters more than any person or party” (Drehle). America may at times take her democracy for granted, but it is what sets this country apart and, as a result, what places certain responsibilities in its corner. Such accepted responsibilities include earning the

designation of safeguarding allies in the name of protecting this idea of democracy. Time reminds readers it was less than a century ago that America's reluctance to help Britain in its struggle against Nazi Germany "ceded the world stage to tyrants" (Drehle). It is undeniable that Trump's recent inaugural address is an eerie echo of this pre-World War II political rhetoric through his repetitive use of phrases like "America first" alongside dividing the people versus those in power; perpetuating that he himself is included among the average Americans, or at least supporting them in backing the notion that they have gotten a "bad deal". This is the first inauguration in recent history to break tradition in the sense of wide scale remaining unrest.

Perhaps the results of this historical election could be referred to as a uniquely calculated accident. Though it seems obvious a Trump presidency had monumental support, it simultaneously makes sense that, had he been up against another candidate, all the pathos-injected rhetoric in the world would not have been enough to grant the same outcome. His campaign arrived at optimal timing with not only a great majority previously steadfast in their dislike and even hatred towards Hillary Clinton, but with a sister majority who have been loathing either Barack Obama or just politics in general for nearly or over a decade. This nation has always enjoyed a good show, and in reality the audience can carry just as much power as the performer. The question remains in how America will continue to handle a President whose logos and ethos are nowhere to be found at curtain call.

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