

Meta-Imaging, *The War Room*, and the Hyperreality of U.S. Politics

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*In this essay we explore a new form of political communication, the meta-image, or the communicative act whereby political campaigns and their chroniclers publicly display and foreground the art and practice of political image construction. We examine a compelling example of meta-imaging—the 1993 film, *The War Room*. We identify how the film functions as a reflection of the hyperreality of U.S. politics. We then argue that *The War Room*, through the use of naturalized military metaphors, works toward the edification of image making as a normative campaign process and a reaffirmation of U.S. national identity.*

Images are about character, both as projected to the voters and as perceived by them when making their electoral choices (Louden, 1994; Shyles, 1984). Presidential image construction is concerned with presentation (O’Keefe & Sheinkopf, 1974) and with the interface of presentation with policy pronouncements (Nimmo & Savage, 1971). As such, issues and images are intertwined irrevocably (Hahn, 1987; McGee, 1978) in the campaign process such that voters come to an assessment of a presidential image as “determined by the interaction of [the candidate’s] personality and orientation to the world with ours” (Hahn & Gonchar, 1972, p. 61).

Not surprisingly, presidential candidates have always been concerned with projecting an electable image to the voters (Jamieson, 1996; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Wyckoff, 1968). Many studies have demonstrated the contemporary importance of image in actual voting behavior (Campbell, 1983; Hellweg, 1979; Hellweg, Dionisopoulos, & Kugler, 1989; Louden, 1994; O’Keefe & Sheinkopf, 1974; Rudd, 1986; Shyles, 1984). Others have demonstrated how television maximizes and technologizes the power of image in U.S. politics (Hart, 1994; Keating & Latane, 1976; Meyrowitz, 1985).

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The temptation among many political commentators and critics, though, is to dismiss or denigrate the image dimensions of electoral decision-making, arguing that such a focus debases politics and distorts the governmental processes of the United States (Bennett, 1992; Dionne, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Kellner, 1990; Luke, 1986–87; Zarefsky, 1992). Unfortunately, continually bemoaning the state of U.S. image politics only perpetuates a cynicism and fatalism that corrodes the very substance of democratic governance. As Sigelman (1992) suggested, many media and political critics complain about the state of contemporary politics and ignore the historical reality that campaigns have always addressed process and image rather than content and issues.

We take a different approach in this analysis and thus seek to further understand how image politics work. Our focus here is on a new form of image politics, the meta-image. *Meta-imaging* is the communicative act in which political campaigns and their chroniclers publicly display and foreground the art and practice of political image construction. Meta-imaging is now a common form of political discourse. It is a political-rhetorical genre wherein campaign outsiders attempt to get “inside” presidential campaigns to unmask the image and the “real” candidate.

In 1992, for instance, the campaign yielded a photographic collection of the Clinton campaign, advertised as “candidate Clinton’s private visual diary—the diary he might have kept, had he the time and objectivity” (Bentley, 1993, book jacket). *Newsweek* also produced an insider account of the 1992 campaign, later expanded into a book, where the Clintons were singled out in the preface for “daring to be so open, even in their moments of highest stress and deepest gloom” (Goldman, DeFrank, Miller, Murr, & Mathews, 1994, p. x). During the 1996 presidential campaign, *60 Minutes* was granted exclusive access to the behind-the-scenes moments prior to the Kansas announcement of Jack Kemp as Bob Dole’s running mate. Following the 1996 campaign, *Newsweek* and *Time* both featured insider accounts of the campaign. *Newsweek* billed their special issue as a “previously confidential account of the behind-the-scenes campaign” (“Victory March,” 1996, p. 28). In a photographic spread, *Time* boasted a look “through the keyhole and into the lives of the two presidential candidates” (“Inside the Campaign,” 1996, pp. 38–39). This form of political communication offers insider access to campaigns and the process of political image construction. Such accounts appear as good investigative journalism or diligent documentary filmmaking. These rhetorics of political imaging, however, are highly managed and controlled by the campaigns to put the best image forward of a candidate and a campaign. To that end, their appearance as “journalistic acumen” or “documentary”-style filmmaking is a simple illusion that masks their overtly political nature.

Here, we explore the strategic uses and ideological consequences of image politics by examining a compelling example of meta-imaging—the 1993 film, *The War Room*. This film offers its audiences a visual insider account of Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign. *The War Room* continues to resonate in U.S. political culture. References are regularly made to the “war room” as a site of political activity whenever a political crisis occurs. The film itself appears with some regularity in clips and still photographs. Indeed, *The War Room* is an enduring part of our political culture, with an ideological force that frequently surfaces in political

discourse. It is representative of important cultural and political trends that define contemporary politics as concerned largely with the construction of political image.

To explicate the presence and influence of meta-imaging, we analyze *The War Room* in two ways. First, we evidence how the rhetorical power of this example of meta-imaging derives primarily from the film's reflection and manipulation of the hyperreality endemic to U.S. politics. The postmodern principle of *hyperreality* holds that because of the saturation of images in contemporary life, it is difficult to distinguish between what is "real" and what is represented or mediated. As such, the distinctions between reality and representation collapse so as to make them meaningless (Baudrillard, 1983, 1993; Carmichael, 1991; Gane, 1991; Kellner, 1989; MacCannell & MacCannell, 1993; Schram, 1991). As Fiske (1996) revealed, hyperreality "implodes the binary concepts of reality and representation into a single concept, and the simulacrum similarly merges the 'copy' with the 'original,' the 'image' with its 'referent'" (p. 2). Strategically, *The War Room* both revealed and subverted the hyperreality of U.S. politics as it functioned simultaneously as a real depiction of the campaign and a highly planned and controlled rhetoric of image construction and maintenance. The assumption of verisimilitude in *The War Room*, furthermore, makes this documentary account of the campaign of significant strategic importance, even though it was released following the 1992 election.

Second, we argue that *The War Room* is an illustration of the ideological dimensions of hyperreal presidential politics. Discourse that is hyperreal seems more real than reality. As such, the defining metaphors, narratives, and myths that govern mediated political communication are of great influence in defining the nature of politics itself. In the case of *The War Room*, the hyperreal structuring of politics according to military metaphors works toward the edification of image making as a normative campaign process.

Military motifs are common in political campaigning and the coverage of those campaigns. When politics is hyperreal, however, and there is no distinction between the metaphors that represent politics and the actual acts of political campaigning, those metaphors acquire even more profound influence. In *The War Room*, this particular use of military images and metaphors imbues and naturalizes the language and influence of political campaigning into the fabric and ideological systems of U.S. politics. This symbolic process occurs polysemically, as the military campaign metaphors express both the factionalization of politics and the unification that politics provides for the community. Ideologically, then, the hyperreality of meta-imaging in *The War Room* amplifies and restores a powerful, albeit illusory, equilibrium to a U.S. political system characterized by angst and uncertainty in the postmodern political system.

The War Room

Billed on the cover of the video as an "adventure story filled with cliff-hanging suspense," *The War Room* was filmed in cinema verité style. It profiles two campaign strategists, George Stephanopoulos and James Carville, and their activities

between the Democratic National Convention in New York and Election Day, 1992.¹ It begins during the New Hampshire primary and, using footage from other media sources (Alter, 1993), chronicles the attempts of the Clinton campaign to confront charges of infidelity and draft evasion. The focus of the film eventually shifts to Carville and Stephanopoulos at the convention, after filmmakers Chris Hegedus and Da Pennebaker were given access and permission to shoot the campaign staff at work. The vast majority of the 96-minute film displays them at various stages throughout the campaign, most notably in the Little Rock campaign headquarters—the “war room”—and at various important locations such as the sites of the presidential debates. For the most part, the action of the film is discursive, involving meetings, strategizing sessions, staff briefings, and speeches. In this sense, *The War Room* invites the inference that it is about actual issues or an actual campaign. The film, though, centers on image and serves as a representation of a representational campaign in an era of representational politics.

Presented as a documentary, *The War Room* implies a high degree of verisimilitude, detachment, and accuracy. Indeed, to say that *The War Room* is an example of meta-imaging put forth by the Clinton campaign would seem incongruous, given its generic classification. The film is clearly offered as what Gronbeck (1990) would classify as an “ostensibly descriptive” documentary (p. 145).² *The War Room* purports to be an observational glimpse at the life of the Clinton campaign, with little interference by or role for the filmmakers. At least in its presentation, the documentary denies any reflexivity, any sense of “metacommentary” about the “process of representation” (Nichols, 1991, p. 56).

Yet, it is clear that the Clinton campaign (Carville and Stephanopoulos, in particular) maintained considerable control over the making and content of the film (Bernstein, 1993; Karlin, 1993). *The War Room*, thus, is not the dispassionate reflection of the reality of the 1992 Clinton campaign that its producers would suggest. Rather, it is a calculated and controlled example of meta-imaging. It is an attempt by the Clinton campaign to put forth their image of the presidential election process. Such a move is strategic. Although the film may not have influenced the 1992 election, it nonetheless feeds the perpetuity of political campaigning (Diamond & Silverman, 1995). Not only does it work to establish the image of Clinton’s campaign, more significantly, it critiques the Republican presidential hegemony that would persist beyond 1992 were Clinton to lose the general election. Read in this way, *The War Room* is a text that illuminates the meta-image as a new form of political communication of some significance.

¹ Upon its release, *The War Room* elicited considerable critical praise. Most of the acclaim celebrated the unparalleled insights and understandings of presidential campaigning that the film offered (Alter, 1993; Maslin, 1993; Rafferty, 1993). *The War Room* achieved the pinnacle of filmmaking recognition when it was nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Documentary Feature category.

² Documentaries are popular texts for rhetorical and critical analysis (e.g., Armstrong, 1990; Hornig, 1990; Medhurst & Benson, 1981; Orvell, 1994–95; Parry-Giles, 1994; Rabinowitz, 1994). Benson and Anderson (1989), for example, subjected the films of Frederick Wiseman to careful and detailed critical analysis, and the political impact of documentary is the focus of Rosteck’s (1994) analysis of *See It Now* and McCarthyism. Much of this work emphasized the reflexivity of film and the rhetorical dimensions of documentary, in particular.

Meta-Imaging as Campaign Strategy

Historically, campaigns and candidates hid or minimized the processes of image construction. Only via investigative insider (i.e., journalistic) accounts (McGinnis, 1969; White, 1982) or academic analyses of the process (Jamieson, 1996; Nimmo, 1970; Sabato, 1981) were voters given a glimpse of the construction of presidential campaign images—the “packaging” of the presidency.³ These works attempted to illuminate the role and power of political consultants and image makers, bringing to the forefront this form of political advocacy and political communication. All premised on the discovery or unmasking of something previously hidden, these projects tore away some of the mystery of the presidential campaign process.

The War Room, however, expresses and represents an important shift in the discursive enactment of political campaigns. This film manifests the Clinton campaign’s explicit acknowledgment of the centrality of image construction to the campaign process and, thus, evidences the existence of meta-imaging as a campaign strategy. Simons (1994) theorized that when rhetors “go meta,” they are engaging in a “strategic, reflexive, and frame-altering process that either responds to another’s message or to the shared message context” (p. 469). Meta-imaging, like Simons’s (1994) conception of “going meta,” is strategic, reflexive, and frame altering as a response to the entirety of the U.S. political context, rather than to the individualized discursive events. As the political campaigns compete with media organizations for control of the candidate’s image (Diamond & Silverman, 1995), meta-imaging provides a means by which campaigns can assume greater definitional power over that image.

The War Room as Strategic Campaign Rhetoric. A meta-image is strategic in its ability to orient the image construction of a presidential candidate in particular, self-promotional ways. By foregrounding the image construction process, a campaign expands the image process to include the candidate as well as the image makers. If done under the cover of documentary or news, moreover, the meta-image can capitalize on the hyperreal nature of political images wherein issues of image and reality are altered, confused, and distorted for the typical viewer. Regardless of the particular strategy, the choice of a campaign to go meta with its image construction process is a calculated, strategic, and ultimately self-serving decision, transcending the campaign and extending the livelihood of the image-making process.

Some evidence for the strategic nature of *The War Room* as campaign rhetoric comes from the extratextual reporting that addressed the film’s production. Because of its uniqueness, the film attracted considerable attention and generated ample media coverage, revealing the strategic decisions and calculations involved in granting access to the documentarians. For instance, Hegedus and Pennebaker

³ We should note that Da Pennebaker, the producer-director of *The War Room*, has filmed previous campaign efforts. In particular, he produced *Primary*, a 1960 documentary that followed John F. Kennedy as he solicited votes, and *Campaign Manager*, a profile of Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign manager, John Grenier. Neither film achieved the notoriety and exposure of *The War Room* (see Hagstrom, 1993).

were granted limited access to the campaign headquarters in Little Rock. They only shot 35 hours of footage there, even though their filming of the campaign ran from July to November of 1992 (Senior, 1993). Put differently, over 4 months, the filmmakers were allowed to shoot less than 2 days worth of activity. Beyond that, Hagstrom (1993) reported that Carville and Stephanopoulos determined what was filmable and not filmable, and that there was some feeling by the film's producers that "they saved up stuff for us." Hagstrom (1993), in fact, concluded that *The War Room* might be seen as the "ultimate in Carville's and Stephanopoulos's personal spin control skills" (p. 705; see also Maslin, 1993).

In addition, a clear and influential relationship existed between Carville and Stephanopoulos and the filmmakers. Pennebaker remarked in several sources (e.g., Hagstrom, 1993; Karlin, 1993) that Carville and Stephanopoulos were the most interesting people to film in the room. He concluded that they "were like inspirational links between Clinton and the sea of young people working on his campaign" (Karlin, 1993, p. 15). Carville and Stephanopoulos, likewise, greatly admired the filmmakers. Stephanopoulos (personal communication, January 27, 1997) praised Pennebaker, calling him a "genius." Expressing the strategic power of *The War Room* best, Stephanopoulos concluded: "I hope this film will show people how a modern campaign is run and the passion behind it, and that they'll come away with a little more respect for the political process" (quoted in Karlin, 1993, p. 16).

The text of *The War Room* also demonstrates the film's strategic role for the Clinton campaign through the "characters'" responses to the camera and via the issues that are the centerpieces of the film. First, the film's strategic role is found in the ways in which the campaign managers respond to the camera. Both Carville and Stephanopoulos appear keenly aware of the camera's presence throughout the film, often insuring that their backs are not to the camera when speaking. Other individuals register their awareness of the camera as well. In one instance, the film records an Election Day meal with Carville and Mandy Grunwald, the campaign's advertising specialist. On at least three occasions, Grunwald looks nervously at the camera and laughs or smiles, revealing how obtrusive the camera was for some of the individuals in the "documentary."

In addition to the keen awareness of the camera's location, Carville and Stephanopoulos repeatedly call attention to the image-making process. The cameras, for example, are permitted access to at least a portion of the strategizing for Clinton's victory speech. Even though Stephanopoulos tells Clinton on the telephone that he "should speak from the heart," earlier scenes suggest the collaborative nature of the speech-writing process, involving Paul Begala (a campaign consultant who traveled with Clinton), Stephanopoulos, and others, sans Clinton. In the end, Stephanopoulos seemingly supervises the editing process, sending staffers off to revise the speech text. During the final hours of the campaign, Carville also acknowledges his role in Clinton's image construction. After watching Clinton assert, "if you'll be my voice tomorrow, I'll be your voice for four more years," Carville smiles and says, "I thought of that, didn't I? . . . I'll take credit for it" (Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993). Such attribution is commonplace in the film. For example, when Stephanopoulos is paying tribute to Carville's campaign genius,

he asserts: "one person wrote what I call haiku about 5 months ago: 'change versus more of the same'; 'the economy—stupid'; and 'don't forget about health care.'" Thus, instead of celebritizing Clinton's rhetorical powers, the film clearly shifts the focus of the camera and centers the rhetorical dimensions of the campaign in the "war room"—the campaign headquarters. Rather than hiding the ghost-writing nature of campaigns, the Clinton campaign advertises and celebrates the process, simultaneously managing that meta-image.

Such editing suggests the existence of visual insider access for the filmmakers with minimal access to the actual campaign strategizing. Further evidence of such censored access to the verbal conversations is represented in the few informal occasions where Clinton appears. In one scene, Clinton (clad in a t-shirt, running shorts, and a baseball cap) receives a telephone call in his hotel room. After motioning Carville, Stephanopoulos, Begala, and Dee Dee Meyers (press liaison for the campaign) to quiet their voices, the film cuts away to the Gennifer Flowers press conference as if the filmmakers were censored from the actual telephone conversation. On another occasion, a quiet conversation takes place between Clinton and Stephanopoulos, as the latter hurriedly eats. Their voices are hushed. Although certain words are distinguishable, the subject of the conversation is inaccessible. We enter the conversation after it begins and leave it before it ends.

Although the filmmakers were granted visual access, or the appearance of insider access at times, they were routinely barred from documenting many conversations. Such limited access evidences the controlled nature of the film's content. Of course, it is impossible to assess how these subjects might have behaved absent the camera's presence. However, there is a clear sense from the film that they were acutely aware of its place in the room and its power to record events, which simultaneously suggests the managed nature of the film's content.

The issues that are the focus of activity in the film are also instructive. At times, Carville seems to construct messages for the filmmakers, just as they suspected. What is most telling about his "speeches" is that they serve to debase George Bush's image rather than to build up Clinton's image. In one speech, directed toward an unknown recipient in what looks like a hotel room, Carville argued, "why can't we talk about the lowest economic growth in the last 50 years?" (Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993). In a separate conversation with a journalist at the convention, Carville urged, "why doesn't he [Bush] run the economy and not run his mouth. . . . If he can't, get outta the way." In another instance, which seemed to be articulated for the camera in the war room, Carville questioned whether Bush could be the first "incumbent president [to give] an acceptance speech and not mention his economic record."

Also of note is the attention directed to an incident that commanded considerable film time in *The War Room*. Following the Republican National Convention, a Clinton campaign staffer discovered that some Bush campaign materials were produced in Brazil. This immediately propelled Carville to try to create a media scandal. Using his media connections, Carville initially contacted a Washington journalist that he referred to as "the woman in *Broadcast News*" (Hegedus &

Pennebaker, 1993). When CBS and other media outlets refused to air the story, believing the Bush campaign's explanation that the materials were purchased with private monies, the matter was dropped. Angered over the lack of attention to the issue, Carville took the opportunity to chastise the media's "double standard" before the camera:

I believe that on any number of things that we are held to a different standard. I think it is absolutely ludicrous that no one ever asked George Bush about Iran-Contra. Two cabinet secretaries saying that Bush was lying. No one ever said a damn thing . . . [and James Baker], he's beyond being questioned. He gives everybody tickets to the opera. We can't question him. (Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993)

Despite the fact that the Brazil "event" was a nonissue that was totally inconsequential to the campaign, this event occupied roughly 10 minutes, or 10%, of the entire documentary.

This scene is significant for two reasons. First, given the mainstream media's unwillingness to cover this story, *The War Room* became its only outlet, furthering the strategic dimension of this film for the campaign and the self-reflexive intent of the film's content. This scene and the other critiques of Bush and the Republican Party represent the transcendence of image making and meta-imaging beyond the campaign. Regardless of who won, Carville clearly was given a forum for attacking the Republican Party and its leader. Second, because the incident was featured in *The War Room*, it became a real event, a part of the campaign history. In a hyperreal manner, what was not a part of the campaign as it happened became a real part of the campaign's story. As such, the events of the real campaign became less important, less significant than the telling of those events, even to their very ontological essence as events at all (Burgoyne, 1997). The image of the campaign and its reality were collapsed in this one segment in which Carville rescued from obscurity an event that was not a part of the 1992 presidential campaign as experienced by the larger community.

Political Strategy and Hyperreality

Although it offers a visual glimpse into the campaign's strategies, the success of *The War Room* comes arguably from its documentary form. Documentary, in most formulations, is a form that shuns aesthetics and seeks a reflection of reality in as pure a manner as possible (Nichols, 1981, pp. 170–172). More specifically, documentary works to highlight the distinction between reality and representation and to subvert any conception of hyperreality. However, meta-imaging works as a campaign strategy. *The War Room* works as a successful meta-image precisely because politics in the United States are so thoroughly hyperreal. That which is political reality is only real by virtue of its representation. Meta-imaging tries to subvert the hyperreality of politics by providing a more real sense of imaging, from an insider's perspective. Yet, at the same time, meta-imaging relies on the hyperreality of politics as a controlled representation of political reality. As such,

although *The War Room* purports to offer a true, real, insider, documentary account of the Clinton campaign, that account is a masterfully controlled and highly managed exercise of political image construction and representation.

The choice to engage in meta-imaging is a strategic one for a campaign that reflexively acknowledges the role and power of image construction in U.S. politics. The strategic benefits of such a move are evident from *The War Room* and the positive portrayals of the image makers and, by extension, of the candidate. By using the documentary form for such meta-imaging, the campaign capitalized on the perceived, but illusory, "truth" value of this genre (Nichols, 1981; Silverstone, 1983) and tapped into the existing and powerful hyperreality of U.S. political discourse. Yet, because of its presentation as a documentary, the subjective, political nature of this self-promotion and partisan attack was masked.

***The War Room* and the Ideological Consequences of Meta-Imaging**

Although strategic, meta-imaging is also ideological by virtue of its discursive contribution to the systems of meaning and political vocabularies that maintain collective identity and control. In addition, because meta-imaging is hyperrealistic, it magnifies and amplifies its ideological messages. We define *ideology* as those patterns of thought and language that enact systems of power and influence in public, communal existence. Ideology is composed of the commitments, narratives, myths, metaphors, and the like that work to persuade people to believe in particular concepts or to act in certain ways that may or may not be in their personal best interests (McGee, 1980; Thompson, 1984, 1990). Moreover, ideology is powerful because of the texts that express it and the people who personify it. When those texts reflect hyperreality, they make the useful distinction between reality and representation disappear and, thus, enhance the power of the ideological persuasion underway in such discourse.

Hyperreality promotes a shift to metaphors and, in the case of *The War Room*, a shift to a militaristic conception of political campaigning. Diamond and Silverman (1995) concluded that *The War Room* "vividly demonstrated the warrior state of mind of modern campaigns" (p. 108). Indeed, *The War Room* offers a specific ideological interpretation of presidential campaigning that is dominated by military metaphors and narrative emplotments. Johnson (1993) maintained that metaphors are "based on systems of related or interlocking mappings that connect one experiential domain to another" (pp. 9–10; see also Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The metaphorical process is, Thompson (1990) argued, profoundly ideological and works as "an effective way of mobilizing meaning in the social-historical world, and that, in certain contexts, the meaning mobilized thereby may be embroiled with power and may serve to create, sustain and reproduce relations of domination" (p. 64).

To employ a militaristic metaphor in defining the 1992 presidential campaign invokes long-standing, interpretive vocabularies common in U.S. politics (Popkin, 1991; Windt, 1984). War metaphors have particularly salient ideological force in an America struggling with its communal identity in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Commenting on the presence of “tragic fear” in the Persian Gulf War, Ivie (1996) maintained that the “rhetorical legacy of the Cold War is a tragic framework of interpretation that constitutes the perils of *hubris* in the image of a heroic nation struggling globally to redeem itself by contesting the relentless forces of chaos and establishing a New World Order” (p. 176). The consequence of this legacy, Ivie continued, is the requirement that the U.S. “find and fight evil everywhere in the hope of creating and preserving an international utopia of freedom and democratic principles, thereby saving America’s own soul and insuring its material security” (p. 176).

The political hyperreality that engulfs and is expressed by *The War Room* enhances its polysemic ideological message. Because of its supposed reality, the film naturalizes as unpolitical truth the militaristic nature of campaigns, even though such militarism is of central importance to the image of campaigning offered by the film and its subjects. By locating image making within the common interpretive framework of “campaigns as war,” image making comes to occupy an important, legitimate and real function in the practice of the war. Factionalism and division are privileged and the nature of politics is defined by these characteristics.

Simultaneously, the consequence of such militarism is a reassertion of national unity and ascendance. As Burgoyne (1997) demonstrated, depictions of war and martial conflict are common tropes of national identity and unity. They tap into existing and powerful reservoirs of meaning that bind and bond individuals to the nation as mythically created in the depictions. In this sense, *The War Room* reasserts a sense of order, unity, and structure to a postmodern and uncertain political environment. Within that environment, the militaristic framework suggests that political consultants (the image makers—here, Carville and Stephanopoulos) are ascendant and are the personification of order and unification. They guide the candidate (in this case, Clinton) to the achievement of political unity, and they offer the symbols and images that define that national identity. In this way, the war metaphors remind us that, even though we may have different viewpoints, politics, and party affiliations, the important cultural ideal is that the nation is our “primary form of belonging” (Ignatieff, 1993, p. 5).

The War Room’s Militaristic Vision of the 1992 Campaign

Four military themes or motifs are present in *The War Room*. The first military image that emerges from the film occurs in its opening credits. As the words *The War Room* appear on the screen, an explosion of fireworks is displayed. Both messages are militaristic in nature. *The War Room*, as a metaphor, connotes a headquarters or central location for the conduct of war, much like the Situation Room in the White House. The accompanying images are powerful: past generals coordinating war efforts, enemy targets identified by brightly lit maps, and past presidents poised by a telephone ready to issue the next orders. *The War Room* concept is furthered by the appearance of t-shirts that Carville and other staffers wear emblazoned with “War Room Staff” on one side, and the slogan “Speed Killed Bush” on the other. The fireworks in the opening credits also reinforce these mental images. They are loud, spectacular, and reminiscent of guns and

explosive devices. Both the title of the film and the opening fireworks immediately express the bellicosity of this particular interpretation of the 1992 campaign.

The second militaristic message put forth in the film is the powerful construction of the enemy (George Bush and the Republican Party) that pervades the discourse of *The War Room*. Of course, as argued above, constructing Bush and the GOP as enemies is part of the strategic power of the film. Such constructions also work ideologically by putting forth a particular version of political campaigns premised on confrontation and the finality of victory or defeat, symbolically eliminating the possibility of compromise or accommodation. As Edelman (1988) argued, the construction of political enemies helps to “give the political spectacle its power to arouse passions, fears, and hopes, the more so because an enemy to some people is an ally or innocent victim to others” (p. 66).

Constructing the enemy in the campaign was the main topic of Carville’s speech to the New Hampshire Clinton campaign staff at the very beginning of *The War Room*. The Republican Party, according to Carville, was responsible for most of the unsavory revelations about Clinton. As he said, “It’s going to come out that Roger Ailes is behind a lot of this stuff before the election, that you’ve been seeing about Governor Clinton” (Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993). He went on to attack Georgette Mosbacher, a key Republican campaign contributor, who, Carville argued, “can’t wait until this election’s over so she can get her Mazeratti and her jewels back.” To the applause of the assembled campaign operatives, he concluded with a charge: “Don’t forget who the real enemy is in here and don’t forget what we’re really campaigning against.” Interestingly, the speech occurs in the midst of the New Hampshire primary, with Bill Clinton’s nomination still very much in doubt.⁴

Third, *The War Room* converts Carville and Stephanopoulos metaphorically and hyperrealistically into military heroes, who, because of their perseverance and skill, were able to win the war of the general election campaign against heavy odds. The heroism of these campaign operatives occurs first by virtue of the film’s focus on them as the center of all action. They are even identified as the “stars” of the film, when the credits after the title read, “Featuring James Carville and George Stephanopoulos.” By positioning Carville and Stephanopoulos at the center of all activity, *The War Room* suggests that they are the real heroes of the campaign, and that campaigns are really about what political consultants, the image makers, do and say.

The heroism of Carville, in particular, is clearest when Stephanopoulos pays tribute to him the day before election day. Stephanopoulos says, in introducing Carville, that “besides Bill Clinton, one person really gave this campaign focus. . . . He’s about to pass from the role of regular human being into the role of a legend”

⁴ Carville’s speech to the New Hampshire organization is the harshest construction of Bush and the Republicans presented in the film. Later, during an interview at the Democratic Convention, Carville constructed Bush as a consummate politician, which may work further to manufacture an enemy for the general election. He said: “George Bush is an ultimate politician. His political skills are awesome. He may be a joke as the president, but as a politician, I have a great deal of respect for him” (Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993). Of course, this quotation villifies Bush, given the general cultural condemnation of politicians. However, it also heightens expectations about Bush’s political skills.

(Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993). Carville then presents a very sentimental speech. This speech functions as a bookend to the speech given to the New Hampshire campaign staff at the beginning of *The War Room*. The first speech functions as a rallying speech, much like the speech a general would give to troops prior to battle. The speech at the conclusion of the film works as a victory address at the end of a long fight, in which praise is offered to those who have sacrificed. The battle is contextualized within the larger struggle or war, as if giving the fight some meaning and purpose. Near the end of the speech, through tears, Carville concluded that “We’ve changed the way campaigns are run.” Ultimately, the heroism of Carville and Stephanopoulos is perhaps most clearly evident when the film shows several of *The War Room*’s staff taking pictures of the two operatives speaking the night before the election.

Finally, *The War Room* is replete with examples of militaristic language. In Carville’s rallying speech to the New Hampshire headquarters, he speaks of the “tough fight” to come and the propensity of Republicans to “ambush” Democrats. He cautions the audience to know what they are “fighting” against before the Republicans “beat us back” (Hegedus & Pennebaker, 1993). The militaristic language is also found in Stephanopoulos’s spin concerning the final presidential debate, when he argues to the press, “Another good night for Bill Clinton—three debates, three wins. Bush was on the defensive all night.” Later, the film features Clinton himself saying on television to an airport rally right before the election, “We fought for a year, we’ve got two days to go. . . . Fight on, don’t give up.” Even at a lighter, more humorous point in the film, the language of war still appears to control the perspective of the campaign. *The War Room* features Carville and Stephanopoulos, on election day, speculating about the likelihood of Clinton’s defeat and composing a fake concession speech. In it, Carville jokes, “It is not that we have lost this battle; it’s whether we endure in the larger war.”

Conclusion

There are several quite significant implications that emerge from this analysis of *The War Room*. This film is simply a case study, an exemplar, of larger political, ideological systems at work in postmodern U.S. politics. That system is reordering conceptions of image, leadership, presidentiality, and national identity via the texts that express its ideology. We use *The War Room* as our springboard to address this reordering.

First, meta-imaging represents one more example of the symbiotic relationship between media and politics (Bennett, 1988; Parenti, 1993; Reese, 1990). The media interlopers want a unique vantage point from which to narrate their story of the campaign, whereas the image makers seek further control over the public image of their campaign and their candidate. To further market these stories, media reporters are likely to promote the authenticity of their insider accounts. As such, media meta-images are put forth as documentaries, news, or other objective genres of discourse.

In the age of image making, capturing the real, the actual, the authentic, seems

appealing to a public fascinated by celebrities and the intimacies of their private lives (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996). In an attempt to capture attention, and to entice journalists and their audiences, so-called "intimate" access is converted into media events that are simply another means of image control under the guise of realism (Hart, 1994). The meta-image comes to be the "reality" of political campaigning via the forms of documentary and news and their illusions of objectivity.

The meta-image, then, restructures the relationships between media and political campaigns. Meta-imaging interrogates the entire journalistic enterprise, suggesting that access, when granted, simply may be a political tool or ploy of image construction. Thus, the journalistic establishment becomes complicit in the image construction of political candidates. Such complicity may be unwitting, further enhancing the power of these hyperreal depictions of U.S. political campaigns.

A second implication of this understanding of meta-imaging pertains to the power of image-based politics in a postmodern era. Presidents and presidential candidates have always used and manipulated their images for political purposes, but the hyperreality of the meta-image entices publics into the belief that that imaging can be unmasked and revealed. We are invited by the meta-image into the world of campaigning and image construction with the promise, the guarantee, that what we see is real.

In a meaningful way, meta-imaging provides cover for publics swayed by campaign imagery and political persuasion. People in the U.S. experience two symbolic constructions of presidential campaigns, the campaign itself and the series of meta-images offered of the campaign in the weeks and years following it. Politics is restructured in the public mind. The leadership of the presidents we elect is further demystified and personified through the meta-imaging process. The fact that such meta-imaging is put forth as realistic enhances its influence in the public conceptions of leadership, presidentiality, and campaign history.

Third, *The War Room* exemplifies the tendency within political communication to define campaigning according to easily accessed and understood metaphors and narratives. Such metaphors, as in this film, generally invoke images of competition, power, and winning (generally with sports or military vehicles). The construction of image making in this metaphorical rubric is of significant consequence for postmodern U.S. politics.

If a political campaign is a "war," with the stakes and outcomes of "battle," the soldiers or generals in that war become important and crucial to its conclusion. The result is a portrayal of politics in the U.S. that masks or repudiates its republican character. There is no sense in most examples of meta-imaging of the representative, constitutional foundations of U.S. government. Voters are simply numbers on a printout that are aggregated into Electoral College votes. If the presidential campaign is a metonymy of U.S. democracy, then meta-images assert a view of campaigning where all that matters is image making, even more than the image itself. In this sense, the democratic process is materialized into a war or battle in which the important decisions are made by those who possess no legitimate, constitutional power at all.

Another consequence of the representations offered in such meta-images is the perpetuation of a naturalized, militaristic perspective of politics that shapes and

controls actual governance and policy. Rather than negotiation and compromise (Windt, 1984), the processes of government become an extension of campaign battles. Meetings are defined in the media by what was lost or won. Congress becomes deadlocked in endless disputes with little support for negotiation or accommodation, resulting in a process of governing dominated by a rhetoric of power. Certainly the budget battles of 1995 and 1996 evidenced how a rhetoric of confrontation can supersede any rhetoric of negotiation in policy making. Even when negotiation and compromise do emerge, the media and their pundits feverishly try to calculate the political wins and losses of such negotiation.

Nowhere is the power of militaristic representations of politics more evident than in the conflict between President Clinton and Kenneth Starr. This rather protracted and complicated legal matter is regularly defined as a “battle” or “war.” Sides are clearly drawn, and enemies and heroes are starkly defined. Of course, this structuring of politics is not caused by meta-imaging. However, these discourses reflect and express powerful metaphors and ideological perspectives toward politics and governance that are of serious consequence for the U.S. They speak to the larger political shifts underway in U.S. culture, shifts that result from a confluence of political, media, economic, and ideological forces at work in the late 20th century. Most profoundly, such shifts foreshadow the ever-increasing presence of image and image-based politics in U.S. political life.

The use of war metaphors of competition and power also manifests a sense of unity and nationalism that emerges from such meta-imaging. Although militarism may structure politics to highlight difference and division, such metaphors also value and uphold the political creed of the U.S. political system. Meta-imaging is, thus, polysemic. At once, we are invited to see the divisions that define our different political orientations and to celebrate a political system that gives order and unity to our national identity. There is always, in such meta-imaging, a strong sense of unity and commitment to a U.S. political system. Even though deeply divided over budgetary disputes and alleged presidential perjury issues, political officials are quick to remind international audiences that the United States will fight, in a unified manner, any outside aggression. Because such discourse is so thoroughly hyperreal, this unity is given shape and reality by such depictions of U.S. politics.

Finally, the inherent hyperreality of all postmodern political rhetorics mitigates against the metaphors of war and confrontation that they put forth to demarcate political action. Politics is not really about life, death, and battles, but about the images and representations of these weighty issues. Meta-images are, thus, snared in a postmodern, hyperreal trap of their own creation. Democracy in the United States is simply a representation in the postmodern media-information age. In a strange paradox, political rhetorics like *The War Room*, cling to an outdated and modernist conception of politics as war and battle while those same rhetorics simultaneously use the postmodern tools of symbolism and representation to express political realities. Meta-imaging, then, may be the ultimate expression of the confusion and angst of a politics adrift in a postmodern age of representation.

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