

# INTRODUCTION: CAMPAIGN 2004: LOOKING TO THE PAST FOR IDEOLOGICAL CERTAINTY IN A PERIOD OF NATIONAL ANXIETY

SHAWN J. PARRY-GILES AND TREVOR PARRY-GILES

Some moments in the cultural life of a nation are pivotal—they resonate with an everlasting impact that shocks and changes forever. One such moment for the United States was September 11, 2001. We now shorthand September 11 by reference to its date; it is simply 9/11 and it joins December 7, 1941, November 22, 1963, and April 19, 1995, as among those moments that we teach our children and our students, that we remember permanently, that we relive in anniversaries and memorials year after year. Unlike other national traumas—like the assassination of President Kennedy or the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City—the brutality of September 11 is without end for many as U.S. troops continue to pursue a worldwide campaign against “global terrorism” and Americans live in almost perpetual fear of yet another terrorist attack. Indeed, as we write, the United States relentlessly conducts its “war on terrorism” with sustained action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and equivocates over its policies relating to potential nuclear threats in Iran and North Korea. Acts of political violence continue unabated, moreover, with commuter trains exploding in Madrid and London while nightclubs are incinerated in Bali. And the occurrence of car and suicide bombings in the Middle East, from Gaza to Tel Aviv to Baghdad to Beirut, has become an almost daily event. As the symbolic and physical violence of September 11 continues, so does the uncertainty over the cultural and ideological meaning of those events.

*Shawn J. Parry-Giles is Associate Professor of Communication, Director of the Center for Political Communication and Civic Leadership, and an Affiliate Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland in College Park. Trevor Parry-Giles is Associate Professor of Communication and an Affiliated Scholar with the Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland. The authors would like to thank Martin J. Medhurst for the opportunity to edit this special issue and for all of his guidance in the process. They would also like to thank the authors of this issue for their support and hard work throughout this process. Finally, the authors would like to thank Martha Kelly Carr, Abbe Depretis, and Arthur Herbig of the University of Maryland for their editorial support with this special issue.*

Indeed, September 11 is unparalleled as a cultural trauma that demanded a response. The trauma of September 11 has had significant consequences, from longer lines at airports to the denial of freedom and civil liberties for thousands living in the United States and around the world. It means a perpetual uncertainty and a threatening, endless feeling of danger from future attacks and “weapons of mass destruction.” It means, as do all significant cultural traumas, that our sense of collective life will be forever altered and our identity as a community subject to ongoing anxiety and fluctuation.

Such cultural anxiety functioned as the backdrop for Campaign 2004—the first general election in the aftermath of that nation-altering catastrophe. Bill Clinton always says that campaigns are about the country’s future and not its past. But Campaign 2004, we contend, functioned instead as a window into the nation’s collective past, revealing the ideological comforts that citizens long for in a wartime context as well as those ideologically contested moments that citizens toil to forget. As cultural critics Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde note, “In times of change or crisis, nations look to the past and infer a narrative that erases all confusion and contradiction.”<sup>1</sup>

To that end, campaign rituals, particularly the rhetoric that infuses campaigns, can provide psychological comfort, relying on a certainty of the past that is more cathartic than an uncertain future in a war on terrorism where the enemy is ambiguous and the end of the global war is unimaginable. Such a psychological return to the past, of course, necessitates that ideological contested moments of history are either forgotten or resolved simplistically in favor of unity. And, such a return favors more traditional ideological commitments related to gender, race, and militarism. Explaining the complexity of such psychological processes associated with national identity, Victor Burgin contends that “forward movement in life is achieved through a backward movement in memory, but one that is more than a simple temporal regression.”<sup>2</sup>

In reflecting upon such a national psychological regression, we turn to the political topics and leaders that are addressed by the authors of the essays and forum pieces included in this special issue on Campaign 2004. Rather than review the authors’ arguments, though, we instead demonstrate how the rhetoric they interrogate reflects a rhetorical regression, which either provides a sense of ideological certainty or reflects a cultural amnesia when such certainty is too painful or contentious.

In reviewing the campaign discourse of President George W. Bush and Senator John F. Kerry, Christian Spielvogel demonstrates the moral certainty involved in Bush’s discourse about the war. The president’s campaign rhetoric favored polarization and absolutism over ambiguity and contingency—the latter of which opponents used to debase Kerry’s failed candidacy. The bulk of

Bush's oratory put forth a specific worldview that was highly nationalistic and reliant on the historically rooted ideology of U.S. exceptionalism. As Alexander DeConde suggests, in "a world fraught with immorality," a president often positions himself "at the head of a haven of goodness," reminding citizens of the country's exceptionalism "that theoretically endowed Americans with a moral superiority over other peoples."<sup>3</sup> In the face of the uncertainty and insecurity caused by the 9/11 attacks, Bush proffered a concrete and easily discerned vision of the world and the events of 9/11 that was reassuring and (re)inspiring to the electorate. Choosing to reelect President Bush in such a culture of fear was in many ways predictable. As DeConde concludes, "regardless of how competent or inept," Americans repeatedly identify their president as one of the "most admired men" in the nation.<sup>4</sup> That certainty, that reverence for persistent authority, and that ritualized rhetorical reenactment of America's mythic exceptionalism offer the electorate a soothing moment in times of psychological distress.

Roderick P. Hart argues that "during elections, a democracy is re-performed. Through its rituals, its pacing, its daily unfoldings, a campaign makes a population a citizenry."<sup>5</sup> In Campaign 2004, we see a return to more traditional and comforting conceptions of race (and gender) in the (re)constitution of the American citizenry. In assessing Barack Obama's keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, David A. Frank recalls a sense of unification reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr. that is comforting to those who long for such mythic moments as the March on Washington, when we all seemingly came together at one time in a quest for the greater good. Such mythic memories, many charge, were disrupted by a politics of identity of the late 1960s that is still being (re)performed by leaders like Reverend Al Sharpton, accentuating the fissures in U.S. race relations. Mark Lawrence McPhail notes the dangers of such (mis)perceptions of unity, especially when the material conditions of racism live on. Vanessa B. Beasley's reminder of the disenfranchisement of persons of color in Florida and Missouri during the 2000 election offers a sobering memory of the obstacles still in place, demonstrating how quickly such undemocratic realities are culturally erased.

As Burgin asserts, "Institutional racism may ensure that racial minorities live in a condition of internal exile within the nation of which they are citizens—an exile that, if it is not legal, cannot be named."<sup>6</sup> The rhetorical exchange that Frank and McPhail offer, and that Obama and Sharpton performed in the "public 'theater' of history,"<sup>7</sup> is etched deep in our collective memories, reminiscent of the pain and suffering yet to be resolved. Because Obama offered psychological healing rather than a reaffirmation of the nation's psychological demons, he, rather than Sharpton, emerged as a new political celebrity.

Constructions of women in the 2004 campaign also rehearsed a familiar discourse—sexualizing young women voters and entrapping candidates' wives in historically rooted double binds. Tamar Mayer notes that “sexuality plays a key role in nation-building and in sustaining national identity.”<sup>8</sup> Such lingering sexualizations of women and politics are demonstrated in Karrin Vasby Anderson and Jessie Stewart's essay as they reveal how political partisans enticed single women into the voting booth through lingerie parties and nail kits. The mere fact that such women were targeted so intensely is encouraging; yet the sexual legacy of women's political participation illustrates the ongoing trivialization of women's citizenship, rooted in historical fears about women's enhanced promiscuity that were fully expressed in the debates over women's suffrage.

Also pervasive, Lisa M. Burns demonstrates, were the double binds that the wives of the presidential candidates faced, as they either had too much personality or not enough, were too assertive or too invisible. As such media coverage and campaign discourse sexualize women and bind their public image in no-win frames, we arguably see a regression in the discourse of women's civic participation away from the issues that affect their lives and that help create coalitions for change. Since “[f]ears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change,”<sup>9</sup> such a rehearsal of past gender constrictions is not unexpected in a post-9/11 context of war.

In addition to reflecting the historical legacies of race and gender, such ideological certainty and historical amnesia is also reified in the campaign discourse surrounding U.S. militarism. Moya Ann Ball emphasizes how the specter of war, particularly the Vietnam War, loomed large throughout the campaign, resulting in a more hyper-masculinized and heightened militarized discourse from both Bush and Kerry. Throughout, Kerry continued to be haunted by his wartime service and his participation in the antiwar movement. Rather than relive the contestation surrounding the war in Vietnam, the 2004 debate surrounding that contentious war demonstrated most clearly the need for ideological certainty about America's rightness and exceptionalism even in a war the United States did not win. Often forgotten was the significant opposition to the war as well as the charges of U.S. torture that played out in the Winter Soldier Investigations. Those investigations became the subject of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth advertisements about Kerry's 1971 speech before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Such forgetfulness over allegations of U.S. torture, James Hedges and Marouf Hasian Jr. reveal, clearly transcend the Vietnam conflict, as a sense of U.S. exceptionalism wields considerable ideological force in times of greatest uncertainty. George Lipsitz maintains that “Patriotism and patriarchy both ease the anxieties of powerlessness, humiliation, and social disintegration,

offering us identification with the power of the state and larger-than-life heroes, or at least authority figures.”<sup>10</sup> In such a wartime context, the commander in chief rather than the former veteran and war protester emerged as the authority figure with which the majority invested such consonant patriotic fervor.

Intriguingly, through DebateWatch and Web blogs, we also gain insight into the ways in which the U.S. public viewed the war on terrorism and the presidential campaign. Diana B. Carlin, Dan Schill, David G. Levasseur, and Anthony S. King show that many voters were eager for a “return to normalcy” as they sought refuge in domestic matters that reflected typically isolationist sentiments of past postwar periods. Such a desire for normalcy, though, was palatable even though the war’s end was nowhere in sight, representing a psychological return to a pre-9/11 mindset. The U.S. public’s perspective, perhaps, suggests that at times it seems safer to live in the past where we can selectively forget disturbing moments than it is to live in an uncertain present and future. Johnson and Dawson exclaim, “Memories of the past are . . . strangely composite constructions, resembling a kind of geology, the selective sedimentation of past traces.”<sup>11</sup>

In the end, the campaign discourse of Campaign 2004 often reflected a retreat to the known—resurrecting messages of comfort from our past rather than featuring a new political language to confront our global war against terror in a post-9/11 world. Mary E. Stuckey’s review of convention discourse demonstrates most clearly the psychological divisions that exist between the Red/Republican states and Blue/Democratic states. Although many contend that a move to the middle creates minimal differences between the two parties, Stuckey’s analysis shows just how different in philosophy such perspectives are, with one emphasizing the nation’s moral superiority while the other expended more energy on a rhetoric of inclusivity; one emphasized individual achievements while the other talked about commitments to equality. Both parties, though, celebrated the national experiment that began over two hundred years ago. As Otto Bauer contends, “All the romantic delight in the distant past thus becomes a source of love for the nation,”<sup>12</sup> a love that works hard to transcend the divides in search of a national unity even in times of considerable fractionalization.

Leaders of our past also took center stage, John M. Murphy exemplifies, with Democrats waxing nostalgically when Bill Clinton returned to the political spotlight to offer his sense of optimism and political resolve as he provided voters, Murphy contends, with a democratically healthy array of political and policy choices. The discursive focus on the past in the post-9/11 context thus fulfilled not only the campaign ritual of electing old and new political leaders, it also functioned psychologically to create a sense of certainty in time of

greatest uncertainty by savoring discursive mythologies from our collective past. For the first election after September 11, 2001, we had crossed that bridge into the twenty-first century—and many, it seems, wanted to go back.

## NOTES

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2. Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 273.
3. Alexander DeConde, *Presidential Machismo: Executive Authority, Military Intervention, and Foreign Relations* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 291.
4. DeConde, *Presidential Machismo*, 5.
5. Roderick P. Hart, *Campaign Talk: Why Elections Are Good for Us* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9.
6. Burgin, *In/Different Spaces*, 130.
7. Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, and David Sutton (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 207.
8. Tamar Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.
9. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 81.
10. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 83.
11. Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory," 211.
12. Otto Bauer, "The Nation," in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996), 63.

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