

Reagan's "Bear" Parable

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In 1984, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan ran for reelection against Democrat Walter Mondale. Most of Reagan's campaign advertisements were focused on a serene message of America's progress during Reagan's first term in office as president. This is characterized by the well-known advertisement "Morning Again in America." Yet as election day drew nearer, Reagan boldly moved towards a new approach aimed at the issues of foreign affairs. Reagan's most effective political commercial proved to be "Bear," which was a metaphorical reference to the Cold War and the arms buildup. In this thirty-second clip, an enormous grizzly bear is shown prowling the forest, mean, angry, hungry, as the voice of a narrator is heard: "There is a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it is vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear--if there is a bear?" (Schram, "Reagan Aides Bullish" 1)

The bear, commonly used to represent the Soviet Union, grabbed the attention of viewers. In fact, it combined the appeals of logos and ethos to solidify Reagan's message of peace through strength. This advertisement redefined the way that voters looked at the arms buildup and the Cold War in general. It resulted in Reagan's reelection and another four years as president of the United States.

The “Bear” commercial acted as an agent to justify the arms race without increasing Cold War fear. It had a clear and logical message even though “the ad never mentioned the Soviet Union, never mentioned Democratic presidential nominee Walter F. Mondale, never betrayed the fact that it was a political ad until the very end” (Schram, “Reagan Aides Bullish” 1). Typically, when a political advertisement begins by stating which candidate it is about, people of opposing beliefs will immediately turn their attention away from the commercial. Because the commercial was disguised as something other than political, people of all types of ideologies watched the parable without personal beliefs to distract them. The ending reveals a patriotic-looking picture of Reagan before the flag with his campaign slogan, “Peace Through Strength.” Viewers “watched the bear foraging with the sort of interest they would devote to, say, a scene from ‘The Wild Kingdom.’ Then they would talk with each other about what they had seen” (Schram, “Reagan Aides Bullish” 1). Through this commercial, individuals are given the task of discovering the meaning behind the bear. This keeps their attention focused on the advertisement even though they may be Mondale supporters. Rather than trying to scare people with the topic of the cold war, the

bear proved to be a soft, easy way for them to talk about a tough problem. ...

Their problem was that people had fear responses to ads about nuclear war and defense and international strength. Their problem was--how do you defend a hard-edged policy in a way that is widely accepted? (Schram, “Reagan Aides Bullish”

1)

Unlike Lyndon B. Johnson in his controversial “Daisy” advertisement, Reagan wanted to reassure viewers about nuclear war rather than incite fear. Although fear is easily

associated with the Cold War, a combination of the soothing narrator's voice and the serene natural environment keeps viewers alert yet at ease. Even the dialogue is casual and conversational because of the use of contractions. Reagan effectively reassured people of his qualifications to handle the arms race while managing to ease the common concern about a nuclear war outbreak.

A key component of Reagan's "Bear" commercial and all of Reagan's advertisements during the 1984 election was the ethos incorporated in the writing and narration. Hal Riney, writer and narrator of "Bear" and other 1984 Reagan advertisements, was recognized for his "ability to cloak a strong message inside of a softer approach. ... Most political advertising hits viewers over the head, while his work makes just as strong a point but in a less confrontational and more soothing manner" (Raine 3). Unlike other powerful and to-the-point commercials, this advertisement contained nothing controversial, and yet it still influenced the way people viewed "Reagan's extraordinary military buildup" (Raine 1). Most importantly, weeks later viewers remembered seeing the commercial. "Bear" was "memorable in part because it was not what people expected political advertising to be--nasty and combative. 'It was attractive, it was beautifully executed'" (Raine 3). The neutral and cool color palette is the opposite of the loud accusations normally expressed in a political advertisement. This contributed to people's trust in Reagan because he comes across as capable of handling the USSR while remaining rational and collected. Another bonus to Riney's narration was that his "approach mirrored Reagan's philosophy of communication" (Raine 3). Reagan was recognized for his clear and authoritative style of speech. Thus, the advertisement came off as trustworthy and truthful because it was what people would

expect from Reagan. The tone of personal credibility set by Riney's writing and narration is original and trustworthy.

Reagan and his strategists tried to maximize the effects of the message in the "Bear" advertisement by strategically airing it on television before the presidential debate and repeating it numerous times. While all of Reagan's previous advertisements were focused on domestic progress, "Bear" was the first one to focus on foreign matters and was aired "on the eve of the presidential debate on foreign policy" (Schram, "Mondale Ads" 1). In order to win the election, "Each campaign views the final days as a chance to package its message and pound it home on an emotional level that will speed supporters to the polls" (Mayer 1). Strategists have often agreed that the more advertising a political candidate has, the better off the candidate is. The Reagan campaign expected "to have spent \$30 million with an additional \$7 million coming from the Republican National Committee" (Mayer 1). This was a strategic move that had the Republicans outspending the Democrats 2 to 1 (Mayer 1). National security was considered Reagan's greatest weakness during the 1984 campaign. As a result, his officials tried to change national security from a disadvantage to an advantage in Reagan's qualifications to continue as president. To do so, the campaign needed to continuously repeat its message of peace through strength until voters accepted and believed the message. Reagan officials attempted to get the most out of the "Bear" advertisement by airing it while millions of people were watching and repeating it enough to make it believable.

"Bear" is also effective when considered in context with Reagan's first term of presidency, which is associated with his focus on having military superiority over the USSR. As far as foreign and Cold War relations went, "Reagan's was the most anti-

Soviet administration in decades” (Schulzinger 295). In fact, during Reagan’s first term, he “pushed forward the largest peacetime military buildup since 1940” (Schulzinger 295). This background knowledge helps to prove that Reagan was the candidate most concerned with the potential threat of the Soviet Union. He had four years in office to demonstrate his tough stance against Soviet power. Some critics of Reagan argued that the “military buildup raised the specter of nuclear war” (Schulzinger 296). Reagan tries to disprove this in “Bear” by deeming it necessary to be stronger than the Soviet Union because it is impossible to predict what the USSR may do. Reagan wants to be recognized as the more prepared of the two men to handle the unpredictable aggression of the USSR.

Reagan’s risk of airing a political commercial that could be misinterpreted paid off with his reelection. “Bear” was so successful that to this day, political pundits regard this campaign as being one of the most successful in history. Reagan’s idea was even paralleled by George Bush in 2004, when he aired the advertisement “Wolves,” which referred to September 11th and terrorism (Barnes 1). Yet present-day political advertising is rarely similar to Riney’s in tone. Today, vicious attack advertisements and satirical approaches are the norm because of a different political culture. In fact, creativity and originality are almost unheard of when it comes to a twenty-first century campaign commercial.

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[Contents](#)

[Occasions Home](#)

[PWR Home](#)