

How LBJ's Daisy Ad Transformed American Politics



By Evan Epstein

One of the pivotal moments in modern American political campaigning was a sixty-second-long television commercial that officially only aired once. The “*Daisy*” ad was created by Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 presidential campaign in an attack against Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. Airing during the heat of the Cold War, at the height of the American public’s fear of nuclear weapons, and less than two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the ad was meant to stoke Americans’ fear by painting Goldwater as a radical ready to launch nuclear weapons at the drop of a hat. The *Daisy* commercial helped revolutionize the future of American politics by ushering in a new era of attack ads and polarization. Even today, much of America’s political divisiveness can be traced back to this ad, run just once, nearly sixty years ago.

It is important to understand the context of the *Daisy* commercial by understanding the history that led up to its airing. In early American political history, the very concept of campaigning was taboo. George Washington, for example, never “ran” for president. He never had to make comparisons between himself and anyone else; he was simply elected president.¹ Washington preached against the idea of political parties, fearing the division they would cause. Despite the emergence of the nation’s first political factions: the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, by the Jefferson/Burr election of 1800, it was still considered inappropriate for nominees to directly ask the people for their votes. Instead local party supporters would campaign on behalf of their candidates by holding rallies and parades. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a thriving industry had been built around selling paraphernalia such as cards, buttons, and posters in support of presidential candidates.² Even after the Civil War, the political industry — still not run by the candidates but by the parties and the press — expanded to include newspaper cartoonists like Thomas Nast, who popularized political symbols

¹ “The Origins of Modern Campaigning: 1860-1932,” New-York Historical Society, See How They Ran!, December 2, 2014, <http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/seehowtheyran/portfolios/origins-of-modern-campaigning/>.

² “The Origins of Modern Campaigning.”

such as the Democratic Donkey and Republican Elephant, and songwriters who composed slogan-filled campaign jingles.³

In 1880, James Garfield became the first major candidate to speak for himself, giving stump speeches from his own home, in what was called a “front porch campaign.”⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt moved this self-promotional style of campaigning out of the front yard and into the public square, holding rallies in front of thousands at a time. Traveling to connect with as many voters as possible became the norm, creating a need for politicians to adapt their messages to an increasingly politically-minded national electorate.⁵

The political game changed even more dramatically when by 1940 over 82% of American households owned a radio.⁶ Therefore, in his Fireside Chats, FDR was able to speak directly to millions of voters in their own living rooms where they were suffering the devastation of the Great Depression and fearing the horror of World War II. While he was not directly ‘campaigning’ during these chats, the folksy techniques FDR pioneered helped him win more terms than any other president in history.

By 1955, over half of American households owned a television set, which would have an even more transformative impact on politics, on full display during the 1960 Nixon/Kennedy debates. While radio listeners, relying solely on the words they heard, thought that Nixon won that debate, TV viewers were distracted by Nixon’s visible discomfort, as he sweated through a poor-fitting suit, and decided that Kennedy seemed like he would make a better leader — simply because he looked the part.⁷

³ “The Origins of Modern Campaigning.”

⁴ Talia Lakritz, “Then and Now: How Campaigning for President Has Changed over the Years,” Insider, <https://www.insider.com/presidential-campaigns-then-and-now-history-photos-2020-10>.

⁵ Lakritz, “Then and Now.”

⁶ Census History Staff US Census Bureau, “March 2015 - History - U.S. Census Bureau,” https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2015/march_2015.html.

⁷ James N. Druckman, “The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited,” *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003): 567, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-1-00015>.

On September 7, 1964, at 9:50 pm EDT, viewers of *David and Bathsheba* on *The NBC Monday Movie* witnessed a sixty-second ad that would go down in history.⁸ A little girl appears on the screen, standing in an open field. She attempts to count the number of petals on her daisy



as she plucks them, as an imposing male voice counts down from ten, until “BOOM!”⁹ A giant nuclear explosion, complete with mushroom clouds and fiery trails of smoke engulfs the screen, while LBJ’s voice rings out, “These are the stakes — to make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark.”¹⁰ Finally, the ad cuts to a black background with a single sentence, “VOTE FOR PRESIDENT JOHNSON ON

NOVEMBER 3.” A disembodied male voice warns, “the stakes are too high for you to stay home.”¹¹

The public’s initial reaction was overwhelmingly negative, questioning how a political candidate could dare to show such graphic violence on national television during a family-friendly show. More upset than the American people, however, were Barry Goldwater and the GOP, who were furious about what they perceived to be such an egregiously slanderous attack. Although the Johnson campaign reacted quickly by pulling the ad after its first airing, as

⁸ “Daisy (Advertisement),” in *Wikipedia*, May 6, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Daisy_\(advertisement\)&oldid=1086447805](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Daisy_(advertisement)&oldid=1086447805).

⁹ Image: Rtr, “The ’60s at 50: Monday, September 7, 1964: ‘Daisy’ Ad,” *The ’60s at 50*, September 7, 2014, <https://the60sat50.blogspot.com/2014/08/monday-september-7-1964-daisy-ad.html>.

¹⁰ Library of Congress, “*Daisy*” Ad (1964): Preserved from 35mm in the Tony Schwartz Collection, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riDypPIKfOU>.

¹¹ Library of Congress, “*Daisy*” Ad (1964): Preserved from 35mm in the Tony Schwartz Collection, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riDypPIKfOU>.

Drew Babb of the *Washington Post* explains, “the networks . . . duly registered the GOP ire and — to show people what all the fuss was about — ran “Daisy” ad nauseam. Result: The one-time-only spot was shown over and over.”¹² A few weeks after the ad aired, *TIME Magazine* published “The Nuclear Issue,” featuring an article that described *Daisy*’s “obvious implication: if Barry Goldwater is elected President, eating ice cream will be dangerous [referring to another ad similar to *Daisy* produced by the Johnson campaign], and daisy plucking will be a thing of the past.”¹³ The more the news media explained the controversy of the ad by playing it over and over, the more attention was paid to the message of the commercial itself. In the end, the news coverage of *Daisy* served as free publicity, allowing the repeated message to sink into the collective consciousness of the American public. Before long, outrage over the gruesomeness of the ad turned to legitimate concern over the threat that Goldwater and his potentially liberal use of nuclear weapons could be threatening to Americans’ very lives.

The success of this ad was due in part to a new technique in political advertising that used people’s preconceived opinions and emotions to drive home its message even harder. According to *The Responsive Chord* by Tony Schwartz, a preeminent political advertising theorist, *Daisy* was the first campaign ad to incorporate “resonance theory” which “posits that persons in the audience of a particular media object bring with them more information than they are being given; advertising can be designed to work with what an audience already knows to create the desired emotional response.”¹⁴ Accordingly, *Daisy* took advantage of people’s preexisting fear of Goldwater’s radicalism. This fear stemmed from Goldwater’s 1964 GOP convention speech, in

¹² Drew Babb, “LBJ’s 1964 Attack Ad ‘Daisy’ Leaves a Legacy for Modern Campaigns,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 2014, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lbjs-1964-attack-ad-daisy-leaves-a-legacy-for-modern-campaigns/2014/09/05/d00e66b0-33b4-11e4-9e92-0899b306bbea_story.html.

¹³ “The Fear & the Facts,” *TIME Magazine* 84, no. 13 (September 25, 1964): 16.

¹⁴ “Tony Schwartz | American Media Theorist and Advertising Pioneer | Britannica,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Daisy-campaign-advertisement>.

which he preached that “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, and ... moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”¹⁵ In other words, he believed that rightful ends justified extreme and militaristic means. *Daisy* was successful because, even though it was an exaggeration of Goldwater’s actual policies, it capitalized on the kernel of truth about Goldwater’s willingness to go to war that people already believed, sowing enough doubt in the minds of the people to be effective.

Robert Mann further explains that *Daisy* did not even mention Goldwater by name or show his face “because [it] didn’t need to. The audience already had a lot of information on Goldwater’s reckless positions and statements on nuclear war and nuclear weapons ... [the ad] tr[ie]d to use what the voters already knew.”¹⁶ This was made even more effective because of the Public’s extreme fear of nuclear war at the time. Especially given that the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the global destruction it nearly caused, was a mere two years before the ad aired, the fear of starting a third world war still weighed heavily on the minds of the American people. Lloyd Wright of the DNC later confessed that “we all realized [*Daisy*] would create quite a reaction,” later stating that the Democrats’ campaign strategy depended on defining Goldwater as “too impulsive to trust with the nation's defense systems.”¹⁷ *Daisy* ingeniously combined the public’s fear of nuclear war and radicalism to turn Goldwater into Public Enemy Number One, while LBJ stood ready to protect the world from catastrophe.

One month and twenty-seven days after *Daisy* aired, Lyndon Johnson trounced Goldwater in the election, winning forty-four of the states plus D.C., and over 61% of the

¹⁵ “Washingtonpost.Com: Goldwater Speech,”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/may98/goldwaterspeech.htm>.

¹⁶ “When LBJ’s Infamous ‘Daisy’ Ad Changed Politics Forever,” KUT Radio, Austin’s NPR Station, September 11, 2014, <https://www.kut.org/politics/2014-09-11/when-lbj-s-infamous-daisy-ad-changed-politics-forever>.

¹⁷ Robert Mann, *Daisy Petals and Mushroom Clouds: LBJ, Barry Goldwater, and the Ad That Changed American Politics* (LSU Press, 2011): 62.

popular vote — one of the highest margins of victory in American history.¹⁸ According to a Roper Poll after the election, fewer than 50% of respondents replied that issues such as “taxes,” “crime,” “poverty,” “foreign aid,” or even “prosperity of the country” had a “great deal to do” with their vote in the election. Meanwhile, a majority — 57% — said that “control of nuclear weapons” influenced their vote. A staggering 77% replied that they voted based on which candidate they thought would be most successful at “keeping peace in the world.”¹⁹ LBJ successfully convinced voters that, above all else, they should cast their ballot based on which candidate would best prevent nuclear conflict.

Because of *Daisy’s* undeniable success in 1964, practically every presidential campaign since has tried to emulate it in some way. In the 1968 election, for example, Hubert Humphrey’s campaign launched an ad that superimposed the sentence, “Humphrey, there is no alternative,” over an image of a nuclear explosion as a way to highlight Nixon’s lack of support for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.²⁰ Further examples of *Daisy*-like ads abound: in 1972, Nixon attacked McGovern for being too soft on the Vietnam War; in 1984, Reagan attacked Mondale for being too soft on the Soviet Union; in 1996, Bob Dole attacked Clinton for being too soft on drugs, even using clips from *Daisy* to compare the threat of drugs in the nineties to that of nuclear war in the sixties; in 2004, Bush attacked John Kerry for being too soft on terrorism; and in 2016, Trump attacked Hillary Clinton for being too soft on immigration.²¹ However, the best

¹⁸ “Presidential Election of 1964 - 270toWin,” 270toWin.com, https://www.270towin.com/1964_Election/.

¹⁹ “Questions from Opinion Research Corporation Poll: November 1964 (Roper #31103208) | Roper IPoll - Roper Center For Public Opinion Research,” <https://ropercenter-cornell-edu.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/ipoll/study/31103208/questions#960876ab-befa-455f-8a09-e5f1f9f4419d>.

²⁰ “The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1968 - Bomb (Nuclear Treaty),” <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968/bomb-nuclear-treaty>.

²¹ Robert Mann, “LBJ’s Mad Men,” *POLITICO Magazine*, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/lbjs-mad-men-110642>; The Dole Institute of Politics, *Bob Dole for President Commercial - “Daisy”/Drugs*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IiiwhRdQDmc>.

and most effective example of a *Daisy*-inspired attack ad was George H.W. Bush's *Willie Horton* commercial in 1988. The ad tells the story of Willie Horton, a Black man who was convicted of raping a white woman and killing her partner while furloughed from prison. Because this heinous crime occurred when Bush's opponent, Michael Dukakis, was governor of Massachusetts, the commercial warned that a Dukakis presidency would lead to similarly preventable violent crimes occurring. The ad scared people into voting for Bush both by playing into racial stereotypes of violent black men and validating people's fears that Democrats were soft on crime.²² In such a close election, any emotional reason to vote can swing the result; many people credit the Willie Horton ad with doing just that.

Daisy has not simply led to a slew of attack ads but to a more dangerous erosion of the fundamentals of the American republic. In his book *Going Negative*, Harvard Government Professor Stephen Ansolabehere explains why these negative commercials have a polarizing effect on politics. He writes that "attack politics heightens the partisan flavor of political discourse by driving the Independent voter from the active electorate."²³ Moderate voters feel unwelcome in a political environment that only highlights the most extreme positions of each candidate. If the Republican is framed as a fascist and the Democrat a communist, there is no reason for a moderate to vote; both options, in that case, would be equally unattractive.

Importantly, removing the moderate voter from the electorate leads to a vicious cycle that degrades all aspects of political life. As Ansolabehere continues, "polarization of electoral politics translates directly into greater polarization of Congress, ... [as] members of Congress will work harder to represent those partisan interests."²⁴ While this was written in 1995, it is

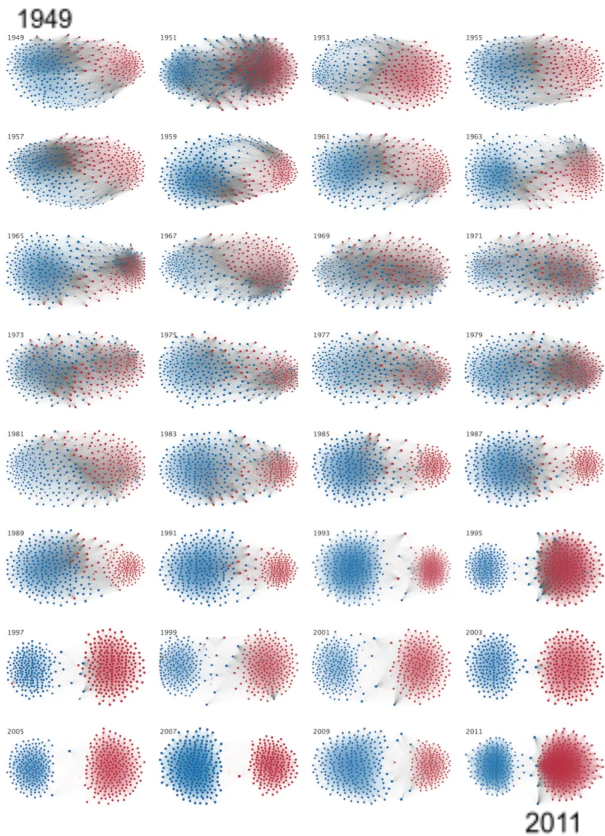
²² Doug Criss, "This Is the 30-Year-Old Willie Horton Ad Everybody Is Talking about Today | CNN Politics," CNN, November 1, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/01/politics/willie-horton-ad-1988-explainer-trnd/index.html>.

²³ Stephen Ansolabehere, *Going Negative* (Free Press, 1995), http://archive.org/details/goingnegativehow00anso_0.

²⁴ Stephen Ansolabehere, *Going Negative*.

equally true today, if not more so. In an unabating vicious cycle, moderates keep getting driven out of politics as campaigning becomes more focused on the hyper-partisan electorate, which in turn makes elected officials more partisan, and so on.²⁵

Even though more Americans today identify as moderate rather than either liberal or conservative, it is nonetheless the fringes of the electorate that are getting all of the attention, and



therefore have all the power.²⁶ In the chart on the left, MIT researchers have shown how the members of Congress voted in each Congressional session from 1949 to 2011 (each dot represents how liberal or conservative a single representative is; blue dots are Democrats, red dots are Republicans).²⁷ The evenly mixed blobs of the fifties, indicating that members frequently cross party lines, give way to rigid inflexibility today. The parties have been plucked completely apart and the purple and gray blur representing the

American center has all but disappeared, leaving almost no room for moderates to have a voice.

In addition to dividing Congress, this polarization seems to be sharply dividing the American people too — creating not just more disagreements, but outright hatred of the other side. A 2019 *Pew Research* poll found that 64% of Republicans classify Democrats as

²⁵ For an example of moderates being driven out of politics, see what happened to Adam Kinzinger after he dared to defy Trump.

²⁶ Gallup Inc, “U.S. Political Ideology Steady; Conservatives, Moderates Tie,” Gallup.com, January 17, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/388988/political-ideology-steady-conservatives-moderates-tie.aspx>.

²⁷ Clio Andris et al., “The Rise of Partisanship and Super-Cooperators in the U.S. House of Representatives,” *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 4 (April 21, 2015): e0123507, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0123507>.

“close-minded” and 75% of Democrats feel the same about Republicans.²⁸ Furthermore, a *Survey Center on American Life* poll finds that 64% of Democrats think that Republicans “pose a threat to the country” and 75% of Republicans feel the same about Democrats.²⁹ It is this outright fear of each other that has escalated modern political toxicity over the decades, largely stemming from the advent of attack politics initiated by the *Daisy* ad.

Over the 160 years from Jefferson to JFK, political campaigning gradually transformed from genteel, hands-off affairs to battles in which candidates personally appealed to voters’ emotions. LBJ’s *Daisy* ad of 1964 then ushered in a dramatically different era for both campaigns and governance. The ad used the powerful potential of the new technology of television to convey political messages to the American people. Now, political strategists used emotional appeals, rather than simple facts, to encourage people to vote for them. Instead of telling people why they should *want* to vote for Johnson, the ad told people why they *had* to. DDB’s campaign successfully convinced the American public that there was no choice but to pull the lever for LBJ because the alternative was too dangerous to even consider. Not only did this type of direct-to-consumer television advertising allow more personal contact with each individual voter, but it afforded the candidates an opportunity to attack each other and appeal directly to voters’ emotions by painting a negative picture of the other. This method has become the preferred choice of campaigning in the decades since, having taken over the industry. The attack ads *Daisy* inspired helped to push moderates out of politics while uplifting the most extreme and radical elements of the country. This has polarized the nation to the point that many

²⁸ Media Inquiries, “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, October 10, 2019,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>.

²⁹ *It is coincidental that these numbers are the same as the *Pew Research Center* poll.*

“Democrats and Republicans Believe Their Opponents’ Policies Threaten the National Interest,” *The Survey Center on American Life*, September 30, 2020,

<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/democrats-and-republicans-believe-their-opponents-policies-threaten-the-national-interest/>.

Americans can envision such an extreme as another new civil war. *Daisy* ushered in an irrevocable change that would forever shape the future of America's political landscape. Not only did the daisy get plucked, but so did the fabric of American Democracy.

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