



# DON'T BE FOOLED BY... CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING

"Sticks and stones may break my bones," goes the old childhood rhyme, "but words can never hurt me." Try telling that to the innumerable targets of negative advertising, sloganeering that emphasizes the negative characteristics of one's opponents rather than one's own strengths. Negative advertising has characterized American election campaigns since the days of George Washington. *George Washington?* His opponents called him a "dictator" who would "debauch the nation."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson was accused of having an affair with a slave, a controversy that has outlived any of the people involved; Abraham Lincoln was claimed to have had an illegitimate child; and Grover Cleveland, who admitted to fathering a child out of wedlock, was taunted with the words, "Ma, Ma, where's my Pa?"<sup>2</sup> (His supporters had the last laugh, however: "Gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha.")

Like it or not (and most Americans say they do not), the truth is that negative campaign advertising works, and in the television age it is far more prevalent than anything that plagued Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, or Cleveland. People remember it better than they do positive advertising; tracking polls show that after a voter has seen a negative ad eight times, he or she begins to move away from the attacked candidate.<sup>3</sup> Some candidates claim that their advertising is not really negative but rather "comparative," and indeed a candidate often needs to compare his or her record with another's in order to make the case that he or she is the superior choice. Negative advertising is nonetheless unpopular with voters, who often see it as nasty, unfair, and false. In fact, advertising that is proved to be false can frequently backfire on the person doing the advertising.

## What to Watch Out For

But how is a savvy media consumer to know what to believe? Be careful, be critical, and be fair in how you interpret campaign ads. Here are some tips. Ask yourself these questions:

- **Who is running the ad?** What do they have to gain by it? Look to see who has paid for the ad. Is it the opponent's campaign? An interest group? A political action committee (PAC) or a 527 group? What do they have at stake, and how might that affect



## "Long History" of Attack Ads

Candidates on both sides use negative ads to paint their opponents in an unfavorable light. In 2012 the Romney campaign's "Long History" ad painted President Barack Obama as unfavorable to the welfare reforms enacted during the Clinton administration, claims that fact checkers said were false.

their charges? If the ad's sponsors do not identify themselves, what might that tell you about the source of the information? About the information itself?

- **Are the accusations relevant to the campaign or the office in question?** If character is a legitimate issue, questions of adultery or drug use might have bearing on the election. If not, they might just be personal details used to smear this candidate's reputation. Ask yourself, What kind of person should hold the job?
- **Is the accusation or attack timely?** If a person is accused of youthful experimentation with drugs or indiscreet behavior in his or her twenties but has been an upstanding lawyer and public servant for twenty-five years, do the accusations have bearing on how the candidate will do the job?
- **Does the ad convey a fair charge that can be answered, or does it evoke unarticulated fears and emotions?** A 1964 ad for Lyndon Johnson's presidential campaign showed a little girl counting as she plucked petals from a daisy. An adult male voice gradually replaced hers, counting down to an explosion of a mushroom cloud that obliterated the picture. The daisy commercial never even mentioned Johnson's opponent, Barry