
Brand “W” and the Marketing of an American President: Or, Logos as Logos

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Keywords: Branding, celebrity, material culture, George W. Bush, semiotics, political campaigns

Abstract

The title of this essay plays off Frederic Jameson’s book title, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. His general notion of the ‘logic of late capitalism’ guides an analysis of the celebrity rise of George W. Bush into a full-fledged brand known as ‘W’ or ‘Dubya’. Following what I call the *Logos of logos*, the semiotic and symbolic messages contained within a variety of Brand W campaign merchandise are analyzed and discussed as a ‘meaning system’ that targets emotional, rather than rational, political reaction. Blurring the lines between politician and celebrity, the symbolic imagery of Brand W products creates an aura around George W. Bush by exploiting techniques adopted from marketing and advertising, which tends to reduce highly complex socio-political issues down to facile emotive appeals. Thus, political discourse itself becomes reduced to a war of image rather than ideas, resulting in a democratic process that is increasingly dysfunctional and strategically divisive.

Introduction

On July 18th, 2005, Senator John McCain (Arizona Republican) appeared on Jay Leno’s Tonight Show. McCain emerged on stage to a raucous standing ovation. That he was there not merely as a political figure, but as a “movie star,” for his cameo in the film *The Wedding Crashers*, struck me as indicative of extent to which a handful of politicians *are* celebrities. The clip of his five-second performance brought the audience enthusiastically to their feet for a second time. While there was perhaps some camp involved in the audience reaction, the sincere fondness for the man came out in a kind of reverence that only celebrity can bestow.

A point has certainly reached in the United States where the line between politician and celebrity has become impossible to discern, at least for the most celebrated politicians. From commercials with former senator and presidential candidate Bob Dole peddling Viagra, Pepsi, and VISA, to Ann Richards and Mario Cuomo hocking Doritos, cameos of Al Gore on *Futurama*, and the successful runs of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger for governorships (First Lady Laura Bush recently even made an appearance on ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, taped in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina), it seems clear that movement from politician to celebrity and celebrity to politician has become a rather simple, if not expected, prospect. But more generally, such examples speak to what a *Logos of logos* entails, namely that anyone can be a celebrity, anything can be branded, if someone or some group finds value in doing so.

The topic of this essay is not as overt an example of celebrity, where politicians become product spokespeople or celebrities win public office. It is, rather, a much more subtle and sublime type of celebrity that I seek to disclose, one that uses the iconography and methodology of marketing to create a celebrity aura around a specific politician, in this case president George W. Bush. This essay is meant to explore the 'logic of late capitalism' as it relates to the marketing of George W. Bush's candidacy for president leading up to the 2004 election. I have couched this discussion in terms of Logos, the 'controlling principle in the universe,' as the reduction of political discourse to the use of logos, 'an identifying symbol (as for advertising).' Guy Dubord famously wrote, in a phrase Frederic Jameson (1997, 18) calls extraordinary, 'the image has become the final form of commodity reification.' It may well be the final form of political reification as well. Evidence of this may be found in the branding of the American presidency, or, at least, of THE PRESIDENT himself.

In a dramatic conflation of advertising, politics, and entrepreneurial spirit, several online sellers offer a range of political 'gear' (t-shirts, baseball caps, polo shirts, ties, commemorative cigars, and of course stickers) that have branded President Bush 'W' or 'Dub'ya'. Websites such as GeorgeW.BushStore.com and DubyaDuds.com have parlayed what began as a mildly derisive term--connoting ignorant Southerners--into a marketing tool for the selling of Brand W. Through what Judith Butler (1997) refers to as 'counter-appropriation', supporters of George W. Bush have thus embraced the 'hate-speech' of progressives and made 'W' emblematic of their struggle. Proceeding through a series of examples of Brand W goods and logos, I will present a semiotic analysis of the meanings and intentions behind various 'W' and 'W' related products, especially for the ostensible viewers of such marketed imagery: Liberals. Looking next to the quasi-ethnographic 'data' collected by the website BrandChannel.com, I will venture an exploration of the impact such branding might have on the political process.

I focus here on a Republican presidential incumbent, not because I wish to disparage George Bush particularly or the Republican Party generally, but because of the inherent ‘structure of feeling’ or attitude that pervades the messages transmitted by the political paraphernalia of Bush/Cheney 2004. I do not focus on Democratic ‘merchandise’ – except in terms related to the Brand W campaign – simply because that merchandise does not convey to me the same deep-structural characteristics of a *Logos of logos*. It may well be the case that a similar argument could be made for officially licensed and unofficial John Kerry presidential wares, but that in no way detracts from the main arguments I will be making, which deal primarily with the power of a *logo* to convey complex political and ideological meaning and foment the creation of a cult of division, irrespective of what side of the aisle you may fall. This essay is intended to speak as much to the specifics of George W. Bush’s campaign merchandise as it is to the universality, even invisibility, of the logic of late capitalism. To be sure, slogans, advertising, jingles, and proto-branding are not new to politics, but I argue that the sophistication of the Brand W marketing campaign is unique in its capacity to reflect one facet of this late capitalist logic: the reduction of discourse to image.

Branding George W.

In his essay ‘The Celebrity Politician: Political Style and Popular Culture’, John Street presents an extensively cited analysis of ‘our understanding of how firms and markets operate [can] help us understand how politicians and politics operate’ (2003, 87). Street recognized an important distinction between politicians and celebrities that is instructive to this essay. He writes,

Politicians may be commodities, just like pop and film stars are commodities, but the way they are sold does not fit into the pattern set by consumer goods. Instead, they belong to the field of cultural goods, which are significantly different in kind and character from other consumer products. Their value lies in their meaning as texts, rather than their use as commodities. (Ibid, 92)

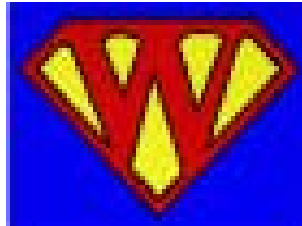
In the present analysis, George W. Bush is himself not only a commodity, but the central figure around which a galaxy of symbolic products orbit, each figuring into an elaborate ‘textual’ system of meaning. We are here concerned primarily with ‘W’ campaign stickers and related items.

I first began to notice small ‘W’ stickers sometime back in early spring of 2004. While driving into town one day, I was waiting at a stoplight. The car in front of me, a black Ford Focus, sported a simple, yet elegant, black sticker with a white

'W'. At first I thought nothing of it, assuming it to be a rock band, but as I squinted to read the fine print below, I was somewhat taken aback. I cannot say for sure whether it was what I read or the subtle sophistication of its design that caused a combination of dread and dismay, but rather than a sticker for a rock band, or a line of clothing, I was seeing a logo for the president formerly known as George Walker Bush.



Now I am aware that this probably rouses little suspicion or trepidation, except to those of us who are wary of its subterranean affects. You might even be thinking, 'What's the big deal? I think it's kind of cool.' I think, however, it deserves some attention, and perhaps concern. Certainly the president and anyone who supports him have the right, and are free to make, a sticker saying anything. That is not at issue. It is not really what they say, but how they say it. It is not political symbolism, but the purely emotive appeal and its attendant evisceration of political debate that concerns me. More to the point is how much these look like corporate logos, like advertisements for a line of cologne or a personal computer, and how quickly they have become a badge of 'brand' loyalty, i.e. to the Republican party, whose most profitable product line is 'W' himself. Further examples (the two circular designs are from GeorgeWBushStore.com and the second www.banneroffreedom.com/products.php) begin to show the versatility of the W logo, once the utility of applying the *Logos of logos* to a political figure was realized:



At the GeorgeWBushStore.com website, ‘operated by Spalding Group, an independent company licensed by Bush-Cheney ’04, *Inc.* [Italics mine], who receives no proceeds from the sale of this merchandise,¹ a mix of merchandise is organized in ‘departments.’ From the ‘Farm-Ranch Team’ and the Bush ‘Across America’ Racing Team to high-end ‘W The President’ products, the Spalding Group has eclectic choices for any would-be Bush supporter. Reminiscent of the John Deere logo, the ‘Farm-Ranch Team’ appeals to rural voters, the ‘Across America’ line is clearly meant to draw from the NASCAR crowd, while the ‘W The President’ department tailors to ‘cultured’ supporters. For those with refined taste, this last category includes silver cufflinks, whiskey glasses, golf towels and balls, and a ‘car plate’, similar to the Jesus Fish.



Product modifications, even after Bush narrowly won the 2004 election, have continued to proliferate. As if to rub the Liberal nose in this fact, 'W' now stands for 'winner' and 'whoop-ass', because W is still the president.



It is really just a series of coincidences that the branding of this presidency could occur in the first place. Although I cannot verify how it all unfolded, it seems credible that a likely progression started simply enough, something like this: We have a second president named George Bush, and there was a need for some way of quickly distinguishing between them. Of course there is the '41' and '43' designation, but that seems more an insider or familial term, presidential dad lovingly referring to presidential son, or vice versa. One can easily imagine a couple of oilmen or ranchers standing at a fence talking about George W., as one might about George Jr., but he is not Junior, and it's a bit condescending to be called such when you are the president anyway. So he quite naturally becomes George W., or simply 'W'. A second coincidence lies in the fact that his middle initial is the only multi-syllabic letter in the English alphabet. If he were George A. Bush, then this would not have been able to occur in the manner it did, for only the letter W can be shortened and accented, from 'double you' to 'dub'ya'. Thus, we would not be seeing the brand association between 'dub'ya' and 'W', or between 'George W. Bush, the president' and 'W THE PRESIDENT'.²

The transition from 'W' to 'Dubya' is an extraordinary exercise in semiotic intention, indicative of a movement from a dictionary entry such as 'w (dub-əl-yoo), the 23rd letter of the modern English alphabet' to 'W (dub-ya), the 43rd president of the United States'. It is also a remarkable instance of orthographic (the representation of sounds of a language by written or printed symbols) evolution. For a sardonic Liberal the 'W' designation is an easy target of derision. George W. becomes 'G. Dub'ya', as to ridicule the southern drawl that would ostensibly accompany it, that is, as a means to mock Bush's ignorant, intolerant 'redneck' supporters. Then, in an ironic twist that only the postmodern condition could potentiate, the putative 'rednecks' in turn embrace it much in the same way that 'queer' and 'nigger' have been re-appropriated, redefined and vaunted. Butler writes in *Excitable Speech*,

The arguments in favor of a counter-appropriation or restaging of offensive speech are clearly undercut by the position that the offensive effect of the speech act is *necessarily* linked to the speech act, its originating or enduring

context or, indeed, its animating intentions or original deployments. The revaluation of terms such as "queer" suggest that speech can be returned to its speaker in a different form, that it can be cited against its originary purposes, and *perform* a reversal of effects. (1997, 14)

Obviously, the 'counter-appropriation' of Dubya does not carry with it the legacy of racial and gender prejudice, degradation, or violence, yet it does have a strong connotative connection, and therein we find the irony. In the popular mind, stereotypes of Southerners as perpetrators of such prejudice, degradation and violence are part and parcel of the necessity *for* the resignification of 'injurious speech'. From the Confederacy, the Ku Klux Klan, the Dixiecrats, to the Religious Right, Southerners have been a kind of national scapegoat for the types of intolerance that compel its victims to assert semiotic control over speech acts that perpetuate injury such that they 'become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes' (Ibid: 15). As a group, we can thus imagine Bush supporters, especially white, Christian Southerners, engaging in a reversal of 'injurious speech' oddly akin to that of Gays and Blacks. This is epitomized in the political swag offered by the website Dubyaduds.com. Here one may join Team Dubya with the click of a button.



Dubya Duds™

What in the heck is DUBYA?
dubya (DUB-ya) *n. Slang.* 1. A nickname used for the 43rd President of the United States of America. 2. An informal spelling of the President's middle initial, "W".



Or you can show your affection for George W. Bush by sporting the 'Hero' T-shirt available for purchase at CafePress.com.³



In this scenario, Dubya becomes symbolic of the 'structure of feeling' that conservative, religiously devout white folk have developed in response to the perception of their cultural heritage and religious/political viewpoints having been demonized. Regardless of how many Bush voters have actually bought or identify with such symbolism, the intention behind them seems to be designed to enflame the passions of Bush supporters and at the same time the indignation of those opposed to the Bush administration. Such images seem deliberately intended to humiliate or intimidate those who oppose the Bush administration and its policies.

This next set of stickers is particularly ominous owing to their geographic nature. Their implicit association with a territory, state, country, region, etc., implies, to paraphrase Johannes Fabian's critique of Western anthropology (1983, 140), the wilful imposition of ideological dictatorship on the psyche of those who were once citizens of the United States and now have lost both their citizenship and their nation.

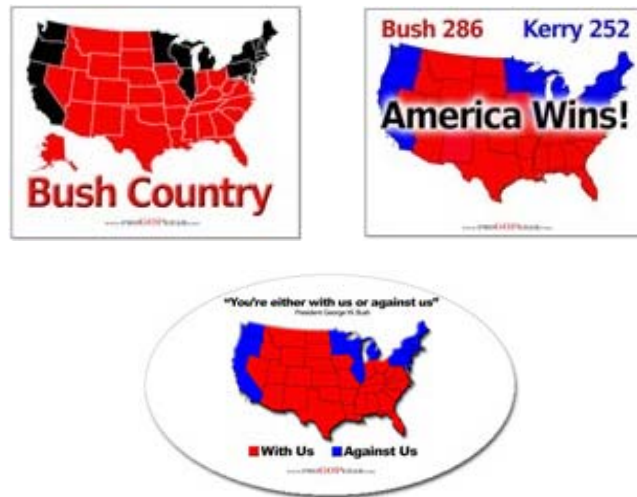




The Great State of Texas has become the Great State of W (both figuratively and literally, considering the success of redistricting at the hands of Tom Delay and others). We in the U.S. are now, by intention or imposition, all inhabitants of 'W-land'. Such geographic symbolism carries with it a tone of imperious, quasi-fascist, patriotism. They are the visual equivalent of the 'love it or leave it' mentality so often resorted to by those who believe they hold some unassailable form of exclusive citizenship.

Taking this idea of psychological occupation to further depths, another series of images conveys the idea of invasion and conquest. In 'Bush's America' we can see Democratic voters as isolated islands within a sea of Republicans, which to my mind very consciously attempts to obscure the closeness of the election by *spatially* representing geographic landmass that went to Bush, ignoring the fact that population density is also represented by this map. Clearly, if you are in the blue areas, you are in a small minority, that is if we measure that minority in terms of the surface area represented by precincts distributed on a map. 'Real Americans' are apparently those who accept that they are now willing subjects of Bush's America. Those who voted for Kerry are lumped in with the 'Canadian foreigners' (traitors?) who have presumably voted for secession from Bush Country because with Bush 'America' wins, which asserts an inherent equivalence between 'Americans' and George W. Bush voters. Finally, as President Bush admonished in his State of the Union Address, you are either with us or against us, which here seems to mean 'with Bush or against America'. Each of the following stickers is for sale at the ProGOPGear.com





In isolation these images, along with those of the 'W' and 'Dubya', are innocuous enough as to be completely ignored, but when taken together as an ensemble the symbolic message is disturbingly autocratic in tone. It is precisely the tone stereotypically attributed to white Southerners and more recently to Neoconservatives: haughty, self-righteous, bigoted and chauvinistic. Such vitriolic, rhetorical symbolism renders the counter-appropriation of Dubya incongruous with the spirit of Butler's concept of reversing hate speech. Indeed these images *are* a form of 'hate speech' disguised as smarmy humor. Yet this perfectly illustrates the aspects related to the 'logic of late capitalism' and the *Logos of logos* where, to paraphrase Guy DuBord, 'image becomes the final form of political reification'. I hasten to add that it is not a particularly pleasant image. Cloaked in stylish simplicity or self-effacing aggression respectively, both the 'W' and 'Dubya' brand campaigns reveal a dark undercurrent pulsing through American politics that is nasty, divisive, and potentially dangerous.

Referring to the work of Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (1997) on Mussolini's rise to power in Italy, Street distinguishes between traditional sales-oriented marketing and the manufacturing of an identity for the 'people', which in turn primes them for marketing manipulation.

The suggestion is that who 'we' are is created via, among other things, the rhetoric of those who seek political power. This is not marketing as selling to an established market or 'demographic'; this is about *creating* an identity (that may subsequently be exploited by marketing strategies). Creating an

identity depends on the use of the symbols and devices of poetry, song, procession, and the like. This is exactly what the early Fascists did to create an emotional response and identity in the people that served the Fascist cause. (Ibid, 93)

The rhetoric behind the "W" campaign products follows a similar pattern of emotive appeal that is, as Margaret Scammell observes in her essay 'Citizens Consumers: Towards a New Marketing of Politics?', 'locked in a time-warp fitting into the mass society scheme of propaganda outlined by Harold Laswell's seminal examination of the First World War: polarise, simplify, repeat the message, personify and vilify the enemy' (2003, 118). Again, it is not political symbolism per se that is of such concern, but rather how particular political symbolism is strategically used to elicit emotional reactions that usurp rational political debate of highly complex issues.

Brand consciousness in the United States has undoubtedly reached a level of neurosis if politicians have themselves become nothing more than a brand name, if the marketing of a politician has been debased to such an extent that substance no longer means anything, and if debating the virtues of a presidential brand has become the basis for making election choices. Yet it does indeed seem to be the case, on the part of voters, campaigns, and the media. As Herbert Marcuse asserted, 'One-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and their purveyors of mass information' (1964, 14). The one-dimensionality presented here is a facile, image-based, representation of complex issues, ideologies and policies, the reduction of which leads to a kind of politics that looks more like a football game, or perhaps a beauty pageant, than an election or a democracy.⁴ One-dimensionality occurs through the 'liquidation of *two-dimensional* culture [that] takes place not through the denial and rejection of ... 'cultural values,' but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale' (Ibid, 57, italics his).

The *Logos of logos* is exemplified most boldly and transparently in the sticker bearing the statement 'Brand the next four years' (also from GeorgeWBushStore.com). Conveying an unmistakable double meaning, a red-hot iron with an Old West-style 'W' prepares to sear the Bush brand onto the future of presidential politics. On the one hand, there is the obvious connotation with cattle ranching and the identification of ownership, but on the other hand this reveals the political strategy being carried out by both the campaign and its product purveyors: to create brand-name recognition for the celebrity spokesman of the Neoconservative ideological agenda. Again we see the tacit aggression (verging on sadism) that is characteristic

of all the images we have seen so far. Who exactly are we to assume is on the other end of this branding iron? Whose flesh is to be burned and scarred by the W?



Lest this seem an outrageous claim to make, keep in mind that under the 'logic of late capitalism' and the *Logos of logos*, ideology is invisible, citizens turned consumers a natural process, and politics as an extension of corporate brand competition inevitable – nothing to see here; no deeper, structural meaning to be inferred. Thus the culture wars become reduced to brand wars, a war of images. Whose *brand* is more appealing is the ultimate measure by which elections will be won, policies enacted, and ideals affirmed. Which *brand* best represents America? Which *brand* do you choose for the next four years? Which *brand* reflects your personality?

Much of what follows are yet other examples of part coincidence, part objective, the consequences of which shed light on the extent to which the Brand W campaign(s) mirrors the normative commercial marketing strategies of any given large corporation/brand specifically, and the complexity inherent in adhering to a *Logos of logos* more generally. Knowingly or not, the W campaign while simultaneously practicing the 'logic of late capitalism', gets tripped up as it steps on the toes of many well-recognized brand names, one of which filed a cease and desist order against the use of the coveted letter. As I hope to show, this is stranger than it may at first appear once one begins to assemble another series of coincidences that led up to it.

Ted Jackson, head of the Spalding Group (and its parent, English Emprise), who wrote an article titled 'Riding the Coattails of Brand Loyalty' (2000), is apparently also riding the coattails of established brand logos. Fully entrenched within the logic of late capitalism, the *Logos of logos* has become a guiding principle for the online seller. Quite literally, Brand W is nothing more than an image commodity to be pitted against the image of the 'competitor', vying for brand loyalty and emotional attachment, not to a human-being, but a product line, a 'meaning system'. Jackson writes in another article, 'A candidate who sees himself or herself as a brand can cut through the communication clutter and achieve the message discipline essential to a successful campaign' (2003). Indeed, Jackson goes so far as to conflate the highly abstract 'corporate entity' with real people, which, under the logic of late capitalism, is not surprising, yet sheds light on just how deeply this logic has been internalized and become normative.

If such [products] are not out there in the main, then there's no campaign... Ultimately, it's not any different from Coca Cola or *somebody else* who does everything they can to put their brand in front of their consumers... When consumers care enough to buy ... it's good for democracy. (cited in Ritsch 2000)

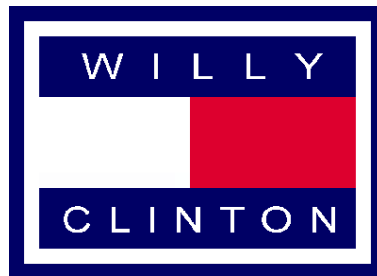
Not only does Jackson equate a corporation to 'somebody', but suggests that democracy is contingent upon 'consumers who care enough to buy' products with which they have developed an emotional relationship. English Emprise's homepage explains why politics and branding are so easily fused for Jackson: 'Ted's career in delivering clear, effective messages began in politics. With two decades of experience in national and state politics, he has managed high-profile political campaigns, including gubernatorial and congressional races.'⁵

The Spalding Group's Brand W campaign, intentionally or not, mimicked the logo of a notoriously liberal corporation, W Hotels, a chain owned by Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide. Some of the few commentaries devoted to the topic of Brand W made comparisons with two well-known brand styles, one being that of Kenneth Cole, the other, W Hotels. Kenneth Cole designed the uniforms for W Hotels in 2001, 'one of the first times in the industry that a brand has partnered with a designer for employee informs', according to Guy Hensley, Vice President of W Hotels (Amarante 2001).





Appropriation on this level would be tantamount to, say, something like Bill Clinton using the Tommy Hilfiger logo to promote his campaign, which I have done to illustrate the point. One might have a difficult time imagining the Hilfiger brand allowing such blatant borrowing if the Clinton election team, or its officially licensed retailer, had created this for stickers and clothing:



It seems, however that the Spalding Group, with its GeorgeWBushStore.com, has succeeded in adopting the chic upscale image of both Kenneth Cole and W Hotels with barely a hint of backlash.

In August of 2004 the *New York Post* reported that Starwood Hotels sent a cease and desist order 'to two political merchandisers, demanding they remove the letter "W" – as in "George W. Bush" – from apparel and accessories they are selling, "that mimic the trade dress of the W hotels, which has the effect of eroding the unique brand identity developed in the W logo."' But other than the *New York Post* article, which appeared in the gossip section, only *Fox News* seems to have reported on the action. I have not been able to find any further information as to the outcome of the alleged order. However, in April 2005 the *New York Times* ran a brief about a lawsuit brought by Jerry Gossett and his company, Rally Concepts, against the Republican National Committee and the Spalding Group for copying his 2001 design of a 'W 43' bumper sticker. As if reading from the official Republican dictionary of terms, Tracey Schmitt, the committee's press secretary,

called the lawsuit *frivolous*. A lawyer for Spalding said in a letter to Mr. Gossett's lawyer that his design did not meet the legal test of being 'substantially similar' to Spalding's' (NYT 2005, italics mine).



Take a moment to ponder the irony and hypocrisy involved in this scenario, a Bush supporter pitches a design to the RNC, which rejects the proposal, then Spalding alters it to read 'W 04', with a different font, and thereby satisfies the technical legal threshold for avoiding any copyright issues. Yet at the same time the Spalding Group copies, almost exactly, the logo of the W Hotel chain, and must either have paid a settlement of some sort or won the case brought against them because all of the products are still available as of this writing.

A parallel to the condescending aggression exhibited in the preceding political paraphernalia extends back to the French opposition to Gulf War II. In an infamous case of neoteny (adults acting like juveniles), many Republican members of Congress boycotted French Fries in the Capital Commissary, opting instead for the name Freedom Fries (because they surely were not about to stop *eating* them), much easier to simply change the name, the connotations and significations associated with it to make a petulant statement of protest. When John Kerry was nominated for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, the Republicans had an entirely new problem, Theresa Heinz Kerry. What self-respecting Republican could stomach squeezing Heinz Ketchup on a pile of Freedom Fries? None. The solution: Make your own brand of ketchup, and hey, let's call it 'W Ketchup', *and* instead of '57 Varieties' we will insert '50 States'. Drape the background with a bald eagle, stars and stripes, George Washington, and silhouettes of soldiers, now *that's* a ketchup. Some loyal Republicans did just that. (Starwood Hotels also sent a cease and desist order to makers of W Ketchup.)



According to the webpage (www.wketchup.com),

All Ketchup is not created equal

W Ketchup™ is made in America, from ingredients grown in the USA.

The leading competitor not only has 57 varieties, but has 57 foreign factories as well. W Ketchup comes in one flavor: *American*.

In side-by-side taste tests of five leading brands, we found that W Ketchup is second to none. You'll never go back to Heinz again!

A Tough Choice

Choose Heinz and you're supporting Teresa Heinz⁶ and her liberal causes, such as Kerry for President.

Choose W Ketchup and you support the Freedom Alliance Scholarship Fund, which provides scholarships to the children of our brave heroes who have fallen in battle.⁷

The emotional sentiment such language is meant to elicit is obvious. Buying Heinz ketchup is un-American, takes away American jobs, and worse yet, supports liberal causes. W Ketchup, by contrast, supports the families of fallen troops. In case that's not enough, there is even a warm ode to Ronald Reagan in a sidebar, thanking him for his selfless service, which is accompanied by a picture of Reagan

in classic ranch attire of cowboy hat and blue button-down work shirt – an unpaid celebrity endorsement in the form of an homage.

Language research for the manipulation of public perception has been an integral strategy of the Republican Party since at least the arrival of political consultant Frank Luntz on the scene with his revolutionary integration of market research and political issue campaigns. In what Rob Stein, a Democratic strategist, calls 'political party merchandising', Luntz engineered the dramatic reversal of opposition to repealing the estate tax. 'Frank Luntz doesn't do *issues*, he does language *around* issues. He figures out what words will best *sell* an issue' (cited in Rushkoff 2004, italics mine). His work seeks to identify which words or concepts trigger the emotional responses that will alter public perception about controversial issues. Nicholas Lemann detailed some of the techniques employed by Luntz in an article entitled 'The Word Lab'. In an interview he stated,

The right name makes the policy sell better. [...] In the entire developed world every single country had an estate tax, and it was completely uncontroversial all over the world. It is clearly the case that this construction, this rhetorical construction of calling it the death tax, took it from the realm of something everyone was for, in an unquestioned kind of way, into something that most people seemed to be against, and is [now] on its way to being eliminated. (cited in Ibid)

Luntz was also behind the language research that changed 'tax cuts' to 'tax relief', the 'War in Iraq' to the 'War on Terror', and 'global warming' to 'climate change'. Most recently, facing heavy opposition to his Social Security reform plan of 'private accounts', it seemed that overnight George Bush was speaking of 'personal accounts'. As if this was what they had always been called, pundits and politicians across the right simply switched the name of the policy in the hope of increasing public support. The 'Dubya counter-appropriation' may be viewed as an extension of this tactical logic. Indeed, I am arguing that this mentality has become normative throughout the Republican Party, from the talking points of policy leaders and their 'handlers' and the PR firm running television and radio commercials, to the officially licensed merchandiser of Bush/Cheney, down to the 'cottage' entrepreneur, and finally to the consumer of the 'meaning system' contained within the vast array of products and images purchased, this kind of celebrity is strange indeed. Under the *Logos of logos* semiotic, and in this case orthographic, construction and control of meaning systems is fundamental to political victory. Part of that construction and control mechanism is devoted to perpetuating and ramifying the logic of late capitalism itself.

Citizens as Political Consumers

'Relationship marketing', 'affinity products' and 'emotional branding' are frequently touted methods within the world of 'marketising'. Experts in the field would certainly have refined definitions that would discern the subtle distinctions between them, but they are all essentially designed get rationally thinking people to respond emotionally and viscerally to brands or issues, and the 'image' manufactured to sell them, for the purpose of converting consumer loyalty. It is not political symbolism itself, but the disproportionate influence of symbolism *as* political communication that threatens the democratic process. Intellectual substance is thus slowly replaced by the emotionally superfluous, as Luntz explains in an interview on the PBS series Frontline,

Pop Culture is what people prioritize in their lives. The truth is, as much as we would like to focus on politics, the American people want to watch television. As much as we'd like to talk about substance, they'd rather listen to music. ...

Eighty percent of our life is emotion, and only twenty percent is intellect. I am much more interested in how you feel than how you think. How you think is on the outside; how you feel is on the inside. So that's what I need to understand. (cited in Rushkoff 2004)

Marketing strategies have been adapted to great effect by recent political strategists, on both sides of the aisle, though to differing degrees. At least part of what separates the Democratic from Republican strategists appears to be the degree to which they identify citizens *as* consumers and, thus, deploy marketing techniques. I will come back to why this might be the case shortly, but first I want to return to some of Ted Jackson's ideas about citizenship, democracy, and politics, which are much more deeply enmeshed within the *Logos of logos* than one might imagine.

Referring to the GeorgeBushStore.com, Jackson says, 'This is a diverse country and we offer different ways for people to say George Bush is our guy... Campaign merchandise is a way for people to get involved' (cited in Goldberg 2004). Political 'involvement' is as simple as buying a T-shirt. He continues, 'When you buy your own sign, you become an activist. It's a much deeper commitment, and not just monetarily' (cited in Dart 2004). This should be indicative of just how thoroughly market logic has become welded to notions of democracy, political activism and involvement, and personal values, at least in the minds of a few Republican marketers/strategists.

Dion Dennis, in his essay 'Inventing "W, The Presidential Brand": The Rise of QVC Politics' (2002), articulates precisely this point by making consumer and citizen, company and politician interchangeable. He writes,

In essence, Jackson is in the business of inventing a new brand, the brand 'W.' Here's what Jackson has had to say about the importance of brands: (Note that I've bracketed the substitute word 'politicians' after 'companies' and 'citizens' after 'customers'.)

Today's society is undeniably brand conscious. We're attracted to brands that project messages we like... Forward thinking companies [politicians] understand that if their brand carries a message, it carries equity. Companies [politicians] now are using that equity to deepen relationships with customers [citizens] by offering supporting products that reflect the personality of the brand. It's called relationship marketing, and it works.

This goal of strengthening a common identity (through meticulously segmented marketing techniques) and fostering the simulation of a long-term relationship is also at the heart of the 'permanent campaign' that defines much of national U.S. political life.

Out from under the veil of the *Logos of logos*, Jackson's statements border on the absurd. I do not doubt the sincerity of his faith in the market logic he lauds, but that is precisely what I find so menacing: how structurally pervasive the logic of late capitalism has become. Compare Jackson's comments with another example of brand dogma, however, and we begin to see how the very idea of branding is insinuated into notions of liberty, justice, freedom, even democracy itself. At the website of the Interbrand Corporation, a brand consulting firm and a division of Omnicom Group, the 'mission statement' lends some understanding of how seamlessly market logic fuses itself to all we in the West hold dear. Although this 'philosophy on brands and branding' would make such a fusion appear natural and rational, I for one believe that there is much here that is highly debatable, if not utterly specious.

Brands are an important influence on our lives. They are central to free markets and democratic societies. They represent free choice.

They also have a profound impact on our quality of life and the way we see our world. They color our lives. They reflect the *values* of our societies.

Megabrands, such as McDonald's and BMW, can even embody the *spirit* of many nations, if not the spirit of an age.

Most importantly, strong brands bestow value far beyond the performance of the products themselves. Brands that do this *possess an idea* worthy of consumer loyalty.

The more inspiring the idea, the more intense and profound the *commitment*. And the more the consumer *believes* in the brand, the more value the brand returns to its owner.

Interbrand is dedicated to identifying, building and expressing the right idea for a brand. An idea that both inspires and endures. An idea that provides meaningful business results.⁸

Brands and logos no doubt 'reflect the values of our society', if by which one means that 'we' value brands and logos. They are certainly 'an important influence on our lives', if one means that they tend to dictate much of what occurs around us, but I seriously doubt that democracy and free markets would not survive without them. They clearly do '*represent* free choice', but they do nothing to *facilitate* or *actuate* freedom of choice, in fact they are engineered to make you choose *them*, which, technically speaking, limits your freedom of choice. And without question, megabrands can be seen to 'embody the spirit of a nation', when that spirit is fundamentally absorbed in a branded consciousness. But these assertions are patently ridiculous if one can attain just a semblance of critical distance from the all-encompassing 'logic' of late advertising. My point being that it is only from *within* such logical structures that brands appear to wield such significance. One must subscribe to such a philosophy of branding for branding to carry the import asserted here.

An interesting survey conducted by the Public Relations arm of Interbrand, BrandChannel.com, aimed to ascertain which of the 'presidential brands' was most successful at selling their candidate. The discussion board posed the question: 'Which candidate is better on brand?' What is conspicuous is how natural it was for many respondents to speak of the candidacies of Bush and Kerry in terms of brands, marketing, and advertising. Even for those who pointed out the absurdity of equating human beings to brand, it seemed 'logical' to do so. There are also some very insightful comments that betray a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which brands work. Here are excerpts of some responses (all italics are mine).

Bush's brand concept lies on America's security and willpower to control the rest of the world, which gives a proud feeling to American people while the rest are offended and annoyed with their arrogant attitude. ... The Bush brand stands for this changed America's status, a notorious peace breaker.

They are both weak in different ways. Bush ... has been in the market place and everyone knows what to expect, whether they like how it tastes or not. Kerry is the new brand on the block, unknown, no experiences for the consumer to measure him against. ... The problem is that both men are not brands, and only a fool would even suggest that they are. But with the big businesses involved in American politics and the money needed to run for the top role, it is America that needs to find a new honest way to find its new leader.

W without a doubt ... He's been sticking to his Guns... So to speak... His *bumper stickers* are head and shoulders above Kerry's... The W, The President stickers are a riot... Not to mention the oval W w/ Old Glory in it... Bush may not be the best president or the best presidential brand... but he sticks to one clear Message... Optimism... I like my US Presidents like I like my brands... AUTHENTIC...! Bush is like Levi's, Coke and Chevy... *Always authentic w/ no BS...* Say what you want about the *man* but *W* is the real deal *in a brand sense...*

Bush could be associated with Ford, Texaco, Levis, Dell, and *ironically*, Heinz. These are classic, strong, American brands with a take-no-prisoners style. ... Kerry seems to be more like a BMW, BP, Ralph Lauren, Apple, and Grey Poupon. What is most interesting about these candidates is that while the brands we relate with Kerry's thinking and style are high end and exclusive, he attempts to act in favor of the middle class. Bush, whose brands are all American and middle class, appeals to the richest one percent in America. Interesting dissonance, no?

The Bush/Kerry case study is a perfect example of how brands matter—and how content is becoming more and more irrelevant.⁹

The thought might arise that the Democrats were simply not sophisticated enough to market their candidate, that Kerry and the Democrats just dropped the ball on this one. David Rothschild, director of the DemStore.com website, explains why, 'What separates [Democrats] from Republicans is we carry nothing flashy. A white W on a black cap doesn't do anything to forward the (national) discourse' (cited in Goldberg 2004). No slick, irreverent brand campaign for Democrats. Instead, perhaps it is best to let supporters take on the semiotic battle for themselves, using counter-logos and puns to counter-appropriate the meaning and symbolism of the opposition, which they did, resulting in examples such as these that are available from CaféPress.com:



The coup de grace in the battle of image and semiotic ascendance, however, comes when someone decides to actually mimic fully the 'W The President' campaign, taking John F. Kerry's middle name and superimposing it onto the W logo. This sticker received some national notoriety in newspapers and blogs, and is available at www.FthePres.com:



It can easily be argued that all of the images, brands, and logos presented here are just in good fun. The entertainment value derived from them is nonetheless integral to maintaining control over the meaning systems generated through the logic of late capitalism and its *Logos of logos*. As Street insistently emphasizes, 'The style is part of a process, just as is marketing and branding. Styles are manufactured too, but in analysing this process we need to appreciate the appropriate analogy – not commerce but celebrity, not business but show-business' (2003, 97). Entertainment is often seen as harmless, benign, not real, and non-threatening. Yet when political discourse is viewed by politicians, strategists, and even the voters themselves, as reducible to thirty-second sound-bites, brand marketing and competition, logo, style, and image, we are faced with the fact that such discourse in no way addresses the complexity of issues, policies, and ideals that are the essence of a democratic society, a free people, a work in progress.

Notes

¹ Emphasis mine.

² Liberal and conservative alike would revert to the "dub'ya" pronunciation in any reference to George Bush, albeit one sarcastically and one sincerely; very few would actually say "double-you."

³ <http://www.cafepress.com/cp/browse/store/bushismyhero.20815191>

⁴ I do not mean to say that the New York Times has no business doing such an analysis. On the contrary, I found it quite brilliant and fascinating, and indicative of how much the image/brand has exploded symbolically. It does nevertheless serve as some measure of how odd this all is, that the readers of the New York Times have achieved such a level of image/brand fluency required to follow such a detailed aesthetic analysis on bumper stickers.

⁵ <http://www.englishemprise.com/aboutus.htm>. This is from the homepage of English Emprise, Jackson's PR company.

⁶ Teresa Heinz holds about four percent of the Heinz stock, and has nothing to do with the day-to-day operations of the Heinz Corporation. This further illustrates the point that it is *image* that counts, not the reality of the situation. The Heinz brand is offensive because Teresa Heinz is married to Bush's opponent, not because the Heinz Corporation supports liberal causes. It is a psychological connotation that is being exploited for the purposes of conveying a "meaning system."

⁷ Available at: <http://www.wketchup.com/about/> (accessed 15 January 2005).

⁸ Available at: http://www.interbrand.com/about_us.asp (accessed 14 January 2005). Information on the Omnicom Group is also available.

⁹ Available at: http://www.brandchannel.com/forum.asp?bd_id=49 (accessed 14 January 2005).

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