Politics as a Façade: Doublespeak and Political Marketing

The political climate is constantly changing, which inevitably forces many politicians to sacrifice personal principles in favor of a neutral stance, in order to keep as many constituents as possible satisfied. This becomes especially true over long political careers which span many decades. However, such neutrality, doubled with media exposure and the increasing need to market political candidates, has left the majority of the American public with distaste for the political system, as well as distrust for political figures. This disillusionment of the public did not happen overnight, but rather is the culmination of the evolution of our political system. Evasive language, corporate campaign funding, and the ever-increasing need to market political candidates have all contributed to the public’s declining faith in the political system.

In September 2011, a CNN poll was released which indicates that only fifteen percent of Americans say they trust the federal government to do what is right the majority of the time, seventy-seven percent indicated that they trust the federal government only some of the time and eight percent indicated that they never trust the government at all. At fifteen percent, the amount of Americans that trust the federal government is at an all-time low, the previous low being seventeen percent in the summer of 1994.¹

Much of this distrust can be directly attributed to evasive language, commonly referred to as doublespeak. Doublespeak is a term which has roots in George Orwell’s 1984. It is a combination of two original terms from Orwell’s work: “doublethink,” meaning the power to

hold two completely contradictory beliefs in one’s mind and accept both of them, and “newspeak,” which is a propagandistic language designed to diminish the range of thought. This type of evasive language is a cornerstone of any skilled politician’s success. Examples of such language include “the Patriot Act,” which is legislation responsible for thinning out the Bill of Rights, thus limiting civil liberties, and “advanced interrogation techniques,” which is torture. Politicians and bureaucrats use doublespeak regularly, not only in press conferences and interviews, but also in their interactions with each other. This is because our perception of reality is framed and influenced by choice of words.

However, politicians do not use such evasive language because they are pathological liars, or because they cannot make up their mind on a certain issue. They do it because the American public expects too much of them. As a whole, politicians are expected to take political positions, intended to appeal to a particular constituency. However, politicians are also expected to simultaneously take moral positions. These two positions – moral and political – often conflict with one another. It is impossible to please everyone when you have to take both a moral and a political position.

Due to the competitive nature of politics, politicians are encouraged to appeal to the smallest majority necessary in order to gain a win. Essentially, this means that fifty-one percent satisfaction will suffice in a democracy. There are two reasons why politicians seek to appeal to the smallest majority. Firstly, it maximizes the benefits that the politician can promise to that majority. Secondly, the politician needs to spread the disadvantages of their policies over the

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largest possible minority. This logic does not require lying in itself – every politician can effectively choose a majority of supporters and a minority of non-supports and openly promise to benefit the majority by disregarding the minority.

However, our expectation that politicians be morally upright and express moral positions ultimately causes them to lie. This is where doublespeak comes in to play – although your fifty-one percent of supporters expect you to take a moral position, they don’t mind if it is done dishonestly. Constituents expect the politician to lie about the morality of his political platform, while remaining sensitive to whether or not said platform benefits them. Evasive, confusing, and circular language is necessary to achieve such results. This allows the politician to take positions which have the appearance of morality while simultaneously having the reality of exploitation and the transfer of wealth and power, which is what really influences supporters.

Nowhere is the manipulative power of words illustrated better than the 2009 film *In the Loop*. In the film, Simon Foster, the British Minister for International Development, states in an off the cuff radio interview that war in the Middle East is “unforeseeable.” This directly contradicts the wishes of both the British Prime Minister and the United States President. Later, Foster tries to recant this statement to a hoard of news reporters with a second statement: “to walk the road of peace, sometimes we need to climb the mountain of war.” Both of these remarks start a series of backdoor dealings and maneuverings on both sides of the Atlantic by both pro-war and anti-war factions. Throughout the movie, various maneuverings occur, including staging fake committees, leaking information and documents, doctoring documents, and spinning information. Of note, one scene shows the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Policy,

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Linton Barwick, editing a transcript for a meeting in which a secret war committee was alluded to, stating that a more accurate transcript would keep a record of what was “meant to be said.” In a pristine example of doublespeak, the aforementioned secret war committee is titled the “future planning committee.”

While there are many examples of doublespeak in In the Loop, perhaps the most significant one is Foster’s original blunder, “unforeseeable.” The definition of unforeseeable is “not able to be foreseen or known beforehand.” The significance of such a vague word being the inciting incident for a political satire about evasive language cannot be understated – “unforeseeable” is a neutral word, with no real significance, yet the press, and the various bureaucratic characters, seek to manipulate the statement to their own ends. Foster’s original statement can basically be summed up as “I don’t know,” yet the press, the British government, and the American government interpret it as anti-war, because it is not clearly pro-war. As the events of the film unfold, it becomes clear that Foster has no place in politics, solely because of his inability to manipulate words in a way that says one thing and means another. In fact, Foster is ultimately fired partially due to this inability – this highlights the importance of evasive language in any political career.

Similarly, in the 1998 film Bulworth, doublespeak is alluded to, but in a different way. J. Billington Bulworth (Warren Beatty), Democratic Senator from California, was at one time a rising liberal star, but in his current campaign he has had to lean heavily to the right in order to keep his office. With political defeat staring him in the face, a sham of a marriage, and no home life, Bulworth decides to end his political career on his own terms. After securing an excessive life insurance policy, he hires a hit man to do him in. With nothing to lose, Bulworth becomes the speaker of uncomfortable truths, despite his history of speaking the nostrums and political
platitudes that the public expects during a campaign. For example, he told an African-American community church that they are not a factor, and never would be, so long as his office is in the pocket of the insurance companies. One phrase from this scene stands out: “Half your kids are out of work and the other half are in jail…do you see any Democrat doing anything about it?” Through statements like this, Bulworth highlights doublespeak in the opposite way of In the Loop: rather than say one thing, and mean another, rather than making false promises, Senator Bulworth starts telling it like it is for the first time in his political career. He becomes the anti-doublespeak, and along the way informs the public of many political realities, that, although well known, no public officials have ever said before. Via making the protagonist the anti-doublespeak, Bulworth highlights doublespeak’s constant presence in the political system.

Bulworth’s truth-speaking hits a nerve during a high society social function for big-wig Hollywood producers. He is supposed to be wooing the crowd and getting them to take out their checkbooks, but instead, he asks of them why it is that their excessive budgets can’t seem to produce any good movies. Shortly thereafter, Bulworth wonders out loud, “It must be the money that turns everything to crap.” In a moment of clarity, he realizes that he isn’t just talking about Hollywood. Later, at a TV debate, Bulworth unmasksthe concept of “objective journalism,” stating: “We got three pretty rich guys here, getting paid by some really rich guys, to ask a couple of other rich guys questions about their campaigns…but our campaigns are financed by the same guys that pay you guys your money.”

As the film rolls on, Sen. Bulworth becomes a rapper in order to get his message across. At a big fundraiser full of rich, capitalist donors, he grabs the mike, goes into the audience, and starts spreading his message of truth:
“One man one vote, now izzat really real? The name of our game is let’s make a deal/Now people got their problems, the haves and the have-nots/But the ones that make me listen, pay for 30-second spots!/We got factories closin’ down, where the hell did all the jobs go?/Well, I’ll tell you where they went – my contributors make more profits hiring kids in Mexico.”

Clearly, Bulworth is no longer a student of doublespeak at this point – he speaks the truth, without hesitation.

In what is perhaps the film’s most powerful scene, Bulworth has a conversation with LD (Don Chaedle), a crack-dealer who turns out to be an articulate critic of the system. He tells Bulworth “you greedy-ass politicians” send a message to inner-city youths “every time y’all vote to cut them school programs, every time y’all vote to cut them funds to the job programs.” In a similar scene, Bulworth asks Nina (Halle Berry) about Black leadership, at which point she explains her theory on how the system has destroyed hopes in the Black community with the closing of factories and the subsequent lack of jobs. Later, when the senator appears on TV, he repeats word for word much of what he heard from LD and Nina. When a shocked interviewer asks him about his new “obscenity,” Bulworth retorts “That’s the real obscenity, Black folks living every day/Is tryin’ to believe a fuckin’ word Democrats and Republicans say.”

While Bulworth’s primary message may be the inherent lies in politics, the root of this message is, clearly, the corrupting influence of campaign contributions. In the words of Mark Hanna, the great Republican kingmaker of the late nineteenth century, “There are two things that are important in politics – the first thing is money, and I can’t remember what the second one
Since the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, Congress has imposed stricter regulations on money in politics – but after three decades, legal scholars and social scientists say that there is little evidence that the system has made a difference. In 2010 the Supreme Court expunged regulations which prohibited corporations from buying campaign commercials that explicitly advocate the election or defeat of a specific candidate. The rationale for the decision is explained in Justice Kennedy’s opinion, in which he notes that no evidence was presented in over 100,000 pages of legal briefs that indicated that unrestricted campaign money every bought a vote. He further elaborates that even after Congress further tightened restrictions with the landmark McCain-Feingold law in 2002, which effectively banned hundreds of millions of dollars in unlimited contributions to political parties, polls indicated that public trust in government has fallen to new lows.

Kenneth Mayer, a political science professor at the university of Wisconsin-Madison, has stated that “there is no evidence that stricter campaign finance rules reduce corruption or raise positive assessments of government…It seems like such an obvious relationship, but it has proven impossible to prove.” In other words, an obvious reality cannot be proven with facts. *Bulworth*, however, needs no statistical proof or hard facts to highlight this obvious reality: “as long as you can pay, you’re gonna get your way/money talks and the people walk.”

In fact, the entire nature of political campaigns is inherently deceptive. Since the 1970s, political campaigns have increasingly been compared to marketing campaigns in which the candidate puts himself on the voters’ market and uses modern marketing techniques, particularly

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7 Kirkpatrick, “Corporate Money.”
marketing research and commercial advertising, the maximize voter “purchase.” Candidates seeking to win elections cannot avoid marketing themselves – this is true and has been a reality for a long time. Prior to the technological advancements of TV spots and Facebook pages, candidates sought office through the handshake, speechmaking, and baby kissing. Political marketing is the reason why it is necessary for all politicians to be a “family man,” and why the phrase “photo-op” exists. However, the candidate must not only develop a marketing strategy calculated to win the support of voters, but also of the party, contributors, and interest groups. The interaction of these four markets is complex, again highlighting the need for political doublespeak and deceit. Political marketing is an inherent part of a successful election.

For example, assume that a candidate has decided to enter politics and seeks elective office. At the beginning, he is an unknown product – he must put himself on the voters’ market. He has to go through many steps that occur in product marketing: develop a personality (brand image), get the approval of an organization (company image), enter a primary election (market test), carry out a vigorous campaign (advertising and distribution), get elected (market share) and stay in office (repeat sales).

The 1972 film The Candidate highlights the corrupting influence of the political machine and the necessity to dilute one’s message to win an election in a similar way to Bulworth. Californian lawyer Bill McKay (Robert Redford) fights for the little man. His integrity and charisma ultimately get him noticed by the Democratic Party machine and he is persuaded into running for the Senate, presumably with no chance of winning against the incumbent. Because of

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9 Kotler, “Overview.”
10 Kotler, “Overview.”
this assumption, it is agreed amongst the campaign managers that McKay can handle campaigning his own way. However, the prospect of winning starts to improve, ultimately forcing McKay to do as he is told by campaign managers and erode his personal beliefs.

*The Candidate* effectively illustrates that campaigns and elections – the flashpoints of our political culture – are nothing more than shallow and cynical exercises in propaganda and technique. After briefly (and clumsily) attempting to keep his principles and politics intact, McKay slowly begins to do whatever seems necessary to win, or at least avoid humiliation, on Election Day. He gets a haircut, begins incorporating doublespeak into his rhetoric, and lets his advisors and strategists manipulate his image through television propaganda. At the end of the film, McKay pulls off an upset victory. However, in the closing scenes, he asks an uncomfortable question, addressed to his strategist and the audience: “What do we do now?” The meaning of this phrase, and the message of the film, is clear: McKay has won, but he knows he has sold his soul to do so. However, winning without selling his soul would have been impossible.

Similarly to *The Candidate* and *Bulworth*, the 1940 film *The Great McGinty* highlights the “manufacture” of a political candidate as well as the corrupting nature of politics. Dan McGinty (Brian Donlevy) begins his political career as a tramp who is cajoled into voting under a false name for two dollars in order to commit voter fraud. He impresses a local political boss when he votes thirty-seven times in a rigged mayoral election. McGinty slowly rises through the ranks, first as an enforcer for the political boss, but ultimately becoming his political protégé. Following a marriage of convenience intended to characterize McGinty as a “family man,” he wins the office of mayor as a reform candidate. Eventually, he makes it all the way to the governorship before a change of heart, influenced by his wife (who he has finally fallen in love...
with), causes him to start taking public service seriously. Only after he decides to “do the right thing” does he lose his political and public support, as well as his corrupt base, which inevitably causes his downfall.

*The Great McGinty* takes a no-nonsense approach to the subject of politics at its core – corruption. This is evident in the first few scenes: McGinty’s rise to political power begins when he figures out a way to milk the voter fraud system set up by the city’s political machine. Ultimately, the film takes a cynical stance on the issue of political corruption. The idea of buying votes from bums doesn’t bother the boss – it’s just good business. In the scene where the politician explains the voting scam to McGinty, he states:

Some people is too lazy to vote, that’s all. They don’t like this kind of weather. Some of them is sick in bed and can’t vote. Maybe a couple of ‘em croaked recently. That ain’t no reason why Mayor Tillinghast should get cheated out of their support! All we’re doing is getting out the vote!

In the end, McGinty’s campaign for the governorship comes down to the question of performance: the person who markets themselves best, who presents the most appealing case, will always win. Who is the winner – the politician, who offers a torrent of rallying cries, or his opponent, who attempts to offer reason and facts in a more subdued display? It is no surprise that McGinty wins.

*The Great McGinty* illustrates that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The electoral process has, and always will be, a matter of histrionics. Whoever’s message can be presented in the most appealing light, whoever speaks with the most passion, whoever is marketed the best, will be the winner. Facts are irrelevant in our political system. *McGinty’s*
portrait of the American system is just as prevalent today as when it was released over seventy years ago.

Given what our political system has become, last September’s CNN poll does not come as a surprise. *The Great McGinty*, *The Candidate*, and *Bulworth* illustrate that in order to be a successful political candidate, it is necessary to sell yourself as a product. The problem is, the process of marketing a candidate usually causes said candidate to sacrifice their true principles and political ambitions in order to succeed: whether it is neglecting the issues of poverty and race as illustrated in *The Candidate* or accepting special interest campaign contributions as illustrated in *Bulworth*. Similarly, *The Great McGinty* turns a street bum into a governor via manipulation, lies, and overall opportunism. *In the Loop* offers a foundation that is extremely prevalent in each of the other films: doublespeak and evasive language is an inherent part of politics, and failure to appropriately manipulate language will result in the death of any political career.

In totality, these four films help illuminate the façade that American politics has become. In order to achieve a lasting political career, it is necessary to lie, or at least tell half-truths. It is necessary to market yourself in order to even get elected – inherently, marketing is deceitful, as it stresses positive attributes and ignores or downplays negative attributes. In order to achieve lasting financial support from the institutions that have enough money to give a candidate a fighting chance in an election, it is necessary to influence policy in a way favorable to them. Given that doublespeak and political marketing have become keystones of any successful political career, it is no wonder that Americans have a historic distrust in our political system.
Works Cited

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