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The Summer of Our Disbelief: Wars, Courts, Trades, Identities, Experiences . . . and Campaigns

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Conspectus

The Summer of Our Disbelief

**Wars, Courts, Trades, Identities,
Experiences... and Campaigns**

John S. Nelson

Poroi, 3, 1, June, 2004



Life is like a box of chocolates . . .

— Forrest Gump

- 1 'Tis the tenth anniversary of a favorite summer movie, signaled by the famous epigraph. In this issue, *Poroi* offers a second assortment of articles. To relish their miscellany, we can taste them like the title character's fine sampler of stories. The referees and I have savored each essay as a distinctive confection of rhetorical analysis and political argument. We have enjoyed especially how several deliver their morsels in colorful foils of narrative. May you, too, find the contents bursting with agreeable flavors, surprising provocations, even a lingering lesson or two.
- 2 I like to view the film as a clever take on American mass publics since the Second World War. In a sympathetic but unsparing way, it shows them — *us* as far as its principal viewers go — to be fortunate fools.¹ We bumble through a world of debatable war, political manipulation, and economic marketing. We are good-hearted “idiots” in the ancient Greek sense of unduly private individuals. Like Forrest Gump, we never quite connect with public affairs even as they never really leave us alone. Yet also like Gump, we are blessed with unbelievable luck. It attunes us to success, outruns occasional sorrows, and looks after us like the lilies of the field. *Forrest Gump* has been the feel-good film of the century's turn in a country known for feel-good politics: witness this summer's celebration of Ronald Reagan as Dr. Feelgood, the Great Communicator, and its advertising contest over whether George Bush or John Kerry is the greater optimist about America.
- 3 A nicer movie is hard to imagine.² Nevertheless it's not exactly nice to show us as fools, running from troubles with an incredible but all-too-transient speed and grace. The implication might be that a little critical acumen discloses much of the luck to be running out. Disgrace and skepticism might dispel, at least momentarily, some American illusions of special goodness. If summer has been the feel-good time in America, maybe this year the feeling is different. Essays in *Poroi's* present issue

suggest as much. And the impression gains momentum from the dueling legacies in June for Reagan and Clinton, the war and torture in Iraq, and especially the work by the 9/11 commission. Relentless air assaults on Americans by presidential campaigns contribute too, as I acknowledge below.³ All told, it is the summer of our disbelief.

Contents

- 4 First at Pittsburgh then at Iowa, **Robert Newman** has made one of the country's most distinguished careers in scholarship by analyzing the sources and conduct of the Cold War. Recently he has been bringing much the same forensic acumen and epideictic passion to the intractable politics of the Middle East. Now his essay on "Moral Judgments and Wars of the Twentieth Century" provides a synoptic take on America at war in the last century. Working from a rhetorical analysis of controversies over the Enola Gay exhibit planned for the National Air and Space Museum, Newman probes the terrible shadows cast by nuclear warheads over national and international politics in the century to come. The resonance of his argument is especially strong with essays in the special issue of *Poroi* on "Rhetorics of Response to 9/11."
- 5 Writing from Chapel Hill, **Elizabeth Markovits** maintains that the World Bank is a further source of troubles for national affairs and international relations in the new century. Again the form is rhetorical analysis of an emblem for an encompassing system. The proximal target is a 2001 World Bank report on *Globalization, Growth and Poverty*. Yet the larger horizons appear in the Markovits title: "Economizing Debate: Rhetoric, Citizenship, and the World Bank." Her argument is that neo-liberal practices of globalization impede democratic citizenship worldwide. In a different register, this makes for reverberations with the *Poroi* Symposium on "The Scope of Rhetoric." There contributors have been debating the suitability of global trade as a template for the academic development of rhetoric. Although the settings differ dramatically, the concerns can be intriguingly comparable.
- 6 In the previous issue, Kembrew McLeod's argument about perplexities of intellectual property in times of electronic reproduction has opened *Poroi* to rhetorics of American law. In the present issue, **Anna Lorien Nelson** explores a different region of this wonderland. Nelson's strategy study on "Cyberspace, Censorship, and the Constitution" analyzes the 2003 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. American Library Association*. She specifies how its reasons for upholding the Children's Internet Protection Act can imperil public libraries as resources for citizen learning. Nearly unnoticed by scholars of communication and politics, libraries have been reconfiguring themselves radically for our cyber time.

Rhetorical accounts of culture, inquiry, and politics do well to include them as institutions important for public life.⁴

- 7 The rhetorical reconstruction of racial identities in Louisiana after the Civil War is the focus for “State Power, Hegemony, and Memory.” From Carleton College, **Marek D. Steedman** calls on theories of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci and auto-communication by Yuri Lotman to help explain how states and politicians structure self-conceptions for citizens. Steedman traces how political identities can be generated from installing public events in memories meant to become hegemonic. His case in point is the proclamation by Governor Newton C. Blanchard of Louisiana Day at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis. Blanchard’s devices for political identity make for telling comparisons to the Ayatollah Khomeini’s – as analyzed by Susan Zickmund in the preceding issue of *Poroi*.

Moves

- 8 Summer is often the time for a few real-estate signs in my neighborhood, but this summer brings a happy confluence of relocations by the rest of *Poroi*’s editorial staff. Each is continuing to help produce *Poroi*, giving us all the more reason to celebrate their ongoing work with the journal and to extend our best wishes for their challenges in fresh settings.
- 9 Associate Editor Frederick J. Antczak is leaving the University of Iowa to become the founding Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In effect, Fred has earned the rare opportunity to create a new college. The ambition, to provide some of the country’s best public education for undergraduates, is a superb fit for Fred’s talents and trajectories. At Iowa, he raised Rhetoric from a program to a department, and he has served most recently as Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences for Academic Programs and Services. In May, the Rhetoric Society of America named Fred to its first class of Fellows. This honors his earlier presidency of the organization and especially his “sustained and distinguished scholarship, teaching, and service to the field of rhetorical studies.” Fred has been Iowa’s resident predictor of elections through the surviving humanistic mode of close attention to their rhetorical dynamics and exigencies. His parting word this summer is that John Kerry will win in November. Currently the reigning champ of social-scientific predictions, the Iowa Economic Markets, are projecting a win by George W. Bush. So we shall see . . .
- 10 Also ere summer is done, Associate Editor Anna Lorien Nelson will have moved from Harvard Government to Yale Law. Now ABD at Harvard, she is ready to explore law at Yale, as originally planned, returning later to Harvard auspices for the doctoral dissertation. Accordingly she is

completing a tour of editorial assistance for *Perspectives on Politics*, the quarterly journal launched at Harvard by Jennifer Hochschild for the American Political Science Association, but Anna will keep assisting invaluablely with *Poroi*.

- 11 For good measure, *Poroi* Associate Editor Robert Hariman is being lured from Drake to Northwestern. Bob's departure from Drake is a huge loss to the whole state of Iowa. But Iowa's loss is Illinois's gain; and it is easy to feel happy for such long-time Northwestern colleagues as David Zarefsky, Dilip Gaonkar, and Thomas Farrell. Especially it is irresistible to feel delighted for Hariman himself!
- 12 Even G. R. Boynton, *Poroi*'s Managing Editor, is slated to move this summer: away, not from Iowa, but from the house just down my little street. In recent years, Bob has augmented his multimedia scholarship on global news and political ads with inventive explanations of medieval politics through the electronic analysis of documents. As a result, he became in March the only political scientist appointed to the British National Archives' advisory panel on medieval source material. Notwithstanding the local move and the trips to England, fortunately, Bob remains the closest of departmental neighbors.
- 13 To all four of these fine colleagues: Congratulations on your new ventures, and thanks for your continuing contributions to *Poroi*!

Campaigns

- 14 As it happens, election predictions by Antczak and studies of campaign spots by Boynton play into an accidental but timely theme that emerges between the lines of this *Poroi* assortment. American wars, global markets, and Court rulings are among the major topics of this issue, yes, but also of the 2004 presidential election. The unfolding contest might turn in important part on how public events make memories and identities. And especially from perspectives of political advertising, the challenges of persuasion addressed by experiential rhetoric may loom large too.
- 15 The summer of 2004 is the first to be filled with presidential advertising on television. At least in the notorious "showdown states" like Iowa, general-election telespots began as soon as it became clear that John Kerry would be the chief challenger for George W. Bush. By November, courtesy of its first-in-the-nation caucuses, Iowa will have experienced some eighteen straight months of campaign advertising directed at the presidency. This is a world record in anybody's book, Guinness or otherwise, and it puts many people in a bad mood. All we "need," groan my parents along with innumerable others, is a summer when even commercial slots on television

reek from political lies and partisan bile. Just watching cable news subjects people to blasts of political advertising: to huddle outside the battleground states can offer better odds this summer but no true escape.

- 16 Should the barrage of presidential ads delight or depress a rhetorician? It delights this one, because there is so much verbal, visual, political, even musical rhetoric to be learned from campaign spots. For the connoisseur of political advertising on television, myriad lessons lie in wait.⁵ To boost your tolerance for electioneering still to come, here are a few developments that have been fascinating me. If you can find comparable ways to enjoy political ads, the summer's campaign might not seem so long.

People Power

- 17 The telling news about presidential caucus and primary spots for 2004 has been their turn to populism. Before the 2000 general election, the ideological politics of liberal democracies and the mythic politics of republics dominated American ads for presidential contests.⁶ Then Bush and Gore both tried populist appeals: Bush claimed compassion for the ordinary people while projecting scorn for the intellectual elites, and Gore called for power to the people rather than the special interests.
- 18 By 2004, all the principal Democratic contenders in Iowa were going populist in one way or another. The Dean mantra was that "only you," the people, "have the power to change this country." The Gephardt pledge to "fight for the middle class" adapted populism to the suburbs. Eventually Kerry reconfigured his campaign to stress how he "cares for ordinary people like you and me." Edwards began as the populist epitome of success in rising from a small house toward the White House. Then his populism gained a more aggressive edge in slamming the emergence of two Americas: the privileged rich over the poor middle-class.
- 19 Lieberman and Clark tried to sidestep Iowa and populist appeals. Lieberman went mostly liberal, emphasizing sober realism and issue positions in the middle of the political road. Clark's ads presented a courageous, competent, compassionate leader: a figure taken less from modern ideologies of politics than the classical politics of republics. (Of course, Kerry's ads were able to give similar elements a populist inflection.) Even avoiding Iowa's "retail" stretch of runway, the Clark and Lieberman campaigns never got off the ground. And the rest was . . . populism.⁷

Issue Information

- 20 So far the earlier campaign populism of Bush and Kerry has not surfaced in their summer advertising. Instead a second trend of 2004 primary season

(year!) has escalated. The makers of presidential ads are cramming them with more and more information. Rather than republican or populist, this is principally a liberal-democratic trend. It plays to the idea that campaigns are for communicating or criticizing the positions of candidates on “the issues of the day.” The average spot gets more issues, more topics, more ideas than before.⁸ The average viewer also gets more stimulation per idea.⁹ Working from cognition research on how visual echoes improve viewer memory for information delivered by voice, ad makers are taking advantage of cheap computer technology to crowd the screen with words.

- 21 These words appear in many fonts to echo or augment what the speaker says. They flash, shine, grow, shrink, and change color. They come in contrasting boxes and translucent bands. They sweep on, across, and off the screen. Almost forty percent of the 115 spots for the Iowa caucuses had “many” (more than three) echoes, augments, or printed labels for speakers and plans. By mid-June in 2004, Iowans could have seen eighteen ads from the Bush campaign and another seven from assorted supporters; they also could have viewed thirteen ads from the Kerry campaign plus another fifteen from various boosters. In these 53 presidential spots already for the general election of 2004, information-intensive ads have risen to seventy percent.
- 22 Presumably this shift is feeding the summer’s chorus of complaints that presidential ads, always bad, have been getting worse: in imagination, in persuasion, in political effect. Just the other day, June 22 to be exact, NPR devoted “Talk of the Nation” to an hour’s discussion of this with Kathleen Hall Jamieson of Annenberg East and Joshua Green of the *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁰ Commercial adman Frank Ginsberg laments that “The ads are like essays. They’re just telling you, they’re not selling you.”¹¹ In the words of his colleague, Linda Kaplan Thaler, “They’re content without charisma.”¹² No wonder the summer and fall promise to be so brutal. The odd thing, of course, is that academicians and journalists, if not always advertisers, have wanted ads for politicians to pepper us with information on the issues. Or so some have said.¹³

Production Value

- 23 The moving letters and words presumably are meant to make presidential spots more engaging and memorable than before. Spots *are* becoming more dynamic visually. Computer advances in video editing enable cuts that come faster and flashier. They slash requirements in time, money, and planning for slow motion that can horrify or heroize as well as for fast motion that can ridicule or unsettle. The 2004 spots are starting to take advantage of these capacities, if sometimes in ways too subtle for viewers to notice as such: pause sometime to watch how spots for Bush and Kerry

play on occasion with the speed of candidate movement in the little clips that announce their ad-approval in voiceover. (A personal statement that the candidate has approved the ad is a new FEC requirement for 2004.)

- 24 Yet to diminish constraints of budget and technology is not to remove the main limits on quality in presidential advertising. Those are more matters of convention and imagination. In *Wag the Dog* (1998), the ruts that pass for presidential advertising provoke one denunciation after another from the film makers, who are far more inventive with humor, danger, spectacle, and intimacy:

Stanley Motss: Why are they sticking
with this age-old horseshit? Why are
they sticking with the same old garbage?
Who hires these people?

Fad King: I mean, I feel insulted just
having seen it. You know what I mean?

Stanley Motss: Yeah. It's offensive.

Maybe with good reason, the makers of political ads fear offending conventions of propriety far more than do the makers of commercials.¹⁴ Yet political ads also hew closer and less creatively to genre conventions established by earlier campaigns.¹⁵ There have been more imaginative ads for minor-party candidates such as Ross Perot (1992 and '96) and Ralph Nader (2000). But then such campaigns arguably have a lot less to lose from risking unconventional spots.

- 25 The twentieth century seldom collected, let alone reported, the evidence needed to judge the electoral effects of humor or any other elements of presidential spots.¹⁶ Nevertheless clever ads for underdogs seem to have enjoyed some remarkable successes in campaigns for lower offices. Humorous ads apparently helped elect such U.S. Senators as Mitch McConnell (R-KY) in 1984, Jim Abdnor (R-SD) in 1986, Joe Lieberman (D-CT) in 1988, Paul Wellstone (D-MN) in 1990, Russ Feingold (D-WI) in 1992, and Rick Santorum (R-PA) in 1994. Sadly the proportion of presidential spots that tap humor still diminished by the decade in the century's second half.¹⁷

Rhetorical Invention

- 26 Since Roger Ailes emerged in the 1980s as the maestro of Republican media, that party's presidential spots have not been the most inventive in every case, but they usually set standards that Democratic contenders struggle to top. The early ambush of Michael Dukakis by 1988 ads from Ailes on behalf of Bush the elder is the obvious inspiration for the current

2004 attempt by Bush the younger to torpedo the Kerry campaign before it can get started. The *Washington Post* argues that recent Bush spots have been, proportionately, three times as “negative” as ads from the Kerry campaign. Kerry’s have focused on introducing their own candidate in “positive” terms. The “catch,” of course, is that independent groups have been bashing Bush with spots that Kerry need not run for himself. From Iowa, I count twice as many 527 and 501(c) spots to date against Bush as all ads against Kerry.¹⁸ This somewhat evens the tone. Probably nothing about presidential ads is more overrated, however, than the vaunted dichotomy between negative and positive spots.¹⁹

- 27 Possibly the most important gap, again this year, is the difference in rhetorical invention. Through June, the Bush spots have been far more creative visually than the Kerry ads. Arguably the most basic template for presidential spots has become the voiceover or the talking figure with claims illustrated at times with clips or photos. Only five of thirteen Kerry ads (38%) depart much from this model, whereas thirteen of Bush’s eighteen spots differ significantly (72%). Rhetorical inventions must be assessed one by one for their links to specific audiences, so the contrast might not say anything reliable about electoral or other effects. Or it might tell volumes.
- 28 To me, the most intriguing Kerry spots offer bands of candidate images and additional figures that fade panoramically into one another at the middle of a highly letter-boxed screen. The visual sweep is invigorating. A moving panorama of a different kind is the key visual device of an animated Bush ad. On its desert battlefield, weapons allegedly opposed by Kerry disappear one by one to leave a soldier turning in puzzlement to the camera. More poignant still is an early Bush spot with no spoken words (beyond his initial declaration of approval). The screen narrates “The Challenge” faced by America during this last term: “An economy in recession. A stock market in decline. A dot com boom . . . gone bust. Then . . . a day of tragedy. A test for all Americans. Today. America is turning the corner. Rising to the challenge.” As Green explains in the *Atlantic Monthly*, political spots imaginative enough to stand out improve their prospects for being noticed and remembered by potential voters.²⁰ Visual, verbal, and aural invention can be crucial.
- 29 This summer the independent spots, too, have been relatively inventive: sixteen of the twenty-two (73%) so far escape the established template in noteworthy ways. MoveOn.org has supplied five of these ads. Its public contest for anti-Bush spots piqued press interest earlier this year.²¹ The buzz has become that Internet ads on Web sites for candidates are the real boundary busters.²² Many seem to animate editorial cartoons more than

they redo telespot conventions. So we shall have to see.

Everyday Voice

- 30 Already, though, what we *hear* from presidential spots is strikingly different. From 1952 to 2000, presidential and other political spots were dominated by the stentorian voices of orators in the republican style. Candidates often spoke this way for political ads; but when they did not manage or even intend this, the voiceover by a professional announcer would provide it. Again this year, Green writes, we can expect political campaigns dominated by “the same portent-of-doom voice-over implying that a miscast vote for first selectman could imperil the republic.”²³ Yet this is not holding in fact for presidential spots so far in 2004. Our registers of political voice are changing dramatically.
- 31 Oratorical tones of voice and the republican acts of speech that relate closely to them have not disappeared from presidential spots in the past eighteen months. But their portentous mode is no longer the rule. Of ninety-six candidate spots for the Iowa caucuses, thirty-seven (39%) mix republican (proud, ominous, or outright reassuring), liberal (serious, low-key, matter-of-fact), and populist (edgy, friendly, or indignant) voices. Thirty-three (34%) stay populist in voice throughout, twenty-three (24%) are vocally liberal, but only three (3%) are predominantly republican in voice.²⁴
- 32 This is a decisive shift from earlier campaigns for the presidency.²⁵ And it continues in the general-election spots so far for 2004. Eighteen (34%) of the fifty-three ads aired in Iowa mix their voices. Nineteen spots (36%) sound populist notes, thirteen of them by independent advertisers, who seem mightily indignant about their targets of attack. Eleven spots (21%) are clearly liberal in tone, while only five ads (9%) are emphatically republican in voice. The Bush and Kerry campaigns have been spreading these three kinds of voices more or less evenly across their spots. Perhaps the two are feeling their ways toward the sounds most suited to 2004. This summer there is little doubt that presidential ads will be among our objects of disbelief. But as Forrest Gump says,
- . . . you never know what you’re gonna get.²⁶

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Notes

- ¹ See John S. Nelson, “American Politics of the Holy Fool: Forrest Gump

as the Little Big Man,” Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism, Washington, DC, 1997.

² See Louis Menand, “Making Nice: Why Politics Means Always Having to Say You’re Sorry,” *New Yorker*, 74, 8, April 13, 1998, pp. 5-6.

³ See Darrell M. West, *Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-1996*, Washington, DC, Congressional Quarterly, (1993, 1997), third edition, 2001.

⁴ See G. R. Boynton and Sheila D. Creth, eds., *New Technologies and New Directions*, Westport, CT, Meckler, 1993.

⁵ See John S. Nelson and G. R. Boynton, *Video Rhetorics: Televised Advertising in American Politics*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1997, p. xi.

⁶ See John S. Nelson, *Tropes of Politics*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, pp. 135-204.

⁷ See John S. Nelson and Anna Lorien Nelson, “Politics of Sight and Sound: Appeals in Iowa Caucus Ads for 2004,” Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, 2004.

⁸ See Joshua Green, “Dumb and Dumber: Why Are Campaign Commercials So Bad?” *Atlantic Monthly*, 294, 1, July-August, 2004, pp. 83-86.

⁹ See Doris A. Graber, *Processing Politics: Learning from Television in the Internet Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

¹⁰ See Green, “Dumb and Dumber.”

¹¹ Frank Ginsberg, quoted in “TV Spots by Bush, Kerry Too Vanilla for Ad Gurus.”

¹² Linda Kaplan Thaler, quoted in “TV Spots by Bush, Kerry Too Vanilla for Ad Gurus,” *Cedar Rapids - Iowa City Gazette*, June 7, 2004, p. 5A.

¹³ See David S. Broder, “A Five-Point Plan to Return Campaigns to Voters,” *Des Moines Register*, [Washington Post Service], January 21, 1990, pp. C1 and C3; Paul Taylor, *See How They Run: Electing the President in an Age of Mediaocracy*, New York, Knopf, 1990; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992; Darrell M. West, “Reforming Campaign Ads,” *PS*, 25, 1, March, 1992, pp. 74-77; Stephen Ansolabehere

and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*, New York, Free Press, 1995.

14 See Green, "Dumb and Dumber."

15 See Nelson and Boynton, *Video Rhetorics*, pp. 27-86.

16 See Nelson and Nelson, "Politics of Sight and Sound."

17 See John S. Nelson and G. R. Boynton, "Laughing All the Way to Washington: Humor in Political Argument," *Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism*, San Francisco, CA, 2001.

18 See Nicholas Confessore, "Bush's Secret Stash: Why the GOP War Chest Is Even Bigger Than You Think," *Washington Monthly*, 36, 5, May, 2004, pp. 17-22.

19 See Glenn W. Richardson Jr., *Pulp Politics: How Political Advertising Tells the Stories of American Politics*, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

20 See Green, "Dumb and Dumber," p. 86.

21 See MoveOn.org, *Bush in 30 Seconds*, January 12, 2004, DVD or videocassette.

22 See Green, "Dumb and Dumber," p. 86.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 83. Also see The Talk of the Town, "The Man Behind the Voice Behind the 1994 Elections," *New Yorker*, 70, 39, November 28, 1994, pp. 49-50.

24 See Nelson and Nelson, "Politics of Sight and Sound."

25 See G. R. Boynton and John S. Nelson, "Multimedia Politics as Public Address," *Conference on Public Address in the Electronic Age*, Public Address Society, Iowa City, IA, 1998.

26 See *Forrest Gump* (1994), directed by Robert Zemeckis. Also see Winston Groom, *Forrest Gump*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986; Winston Groom, *Gumpisms: The Wit and Wisdom of Forrest Gump*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1995.