

## CRUDE LANGUAGE ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

The low points of running for high office

**T**hink this year's presidential campaign has been crass, coarse, and contentious? Campaigns in America have often been rough, with name-calling taking precedence over, and frequently obscuring, the issues of the day.

### “Fatso!”

1796: John Adams (Federalist) vs. Thomas Jefferson (Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** America's foreign policy toward England and France.

**LOW BLOW:** The *Philadelphia Aurora*, which backed Jefferson, referred to the stout Adams as “His Rotundity.” Another pro-Jefferson rag in Boston warned that Adams would support hereditary succession and appoint his son, John Quincy Adams, to be the next president.

**RETORT:** Federalist papers warned that Jefferson's followers were “cut-throats who walk in rags and sleep amidst filth and vermin.” Jefferson was also accused of cheating his creditors and robbing a widow of her estate.

**VICTOR:** Adams

### “Girly man!”

1800 (REMATCH): John Adams (Federalist) vs. Thomas Jefferson (Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** Whether power should be centralized under the federal government (Adams) or held by the states (Jefferson).

**LOW BLOW:** Jefferson hired scandalmonger-journalist James Callender to



produce a pamphlet that referred to Adams as “a hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.”

**RETORT:** Citing Jefferson's early admiration for the French Revolution, a Federalist editorial asked, “Are you prepared to see your dwellings in flames, hoary hairs bathed in blood, female chastity violated, or children writhing on the pike and halberd?”

**VICTOR:** Jefferson

**FOOTNOTE:** Unlike today's anything-goes political atmosphere, criticism of the administration was prohibited under the 1798 Sedition Act, and Callender was jailed.

### “Adulterer!”

1828: Andrew Jackson (Democrat-Republican) vs. John Quincy Adams (National-Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** Free trade. Adams favored a high tariff to discourage

imports; Jackson favored free trade and lower import duties.

**LOW BLOW:** Adams' supporters called Jackson a brawler, gambler, drunk, thief, and adulterer. This last claim proved particularly harmful. Jackson had married his wife before her divorce was official, so there was some truth to the rumor in a technical sense. The shame caused by the attacks on Mrs. Jackson's character undermined her health and led to her premature death from a heart attack shortly after Jackson's victory.

**RETORT:** Jackson supporters called President Adams anti-religious, using as proof the fact that he traveled on Sunday. They also accused him of living in the White House in “kingly pomp and splendor,” and using public funds to buy “gaming tables” and “gambling furniture”; actually, he had simply bought a chessboard and a pool table.

**VICTOR:** Jackson ►

## BACKSTORY

### “Drunkard!”

1844: James K. Polk (Democrat) vs. Henry Clay (Whig)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** Annexation of Texas and Oregon – Polk favored it, Clay waffled.

**LOW BLOW:** Democrats said Clay was a drunkard, addicted to gambling and prostitutes, and a slave trader to boot.

**RETORT:** Polk had a reputation for being so dull as to be incapable of immoral behavior. So the Whigs circulated a story that Polk, like Clay a slave owner, inhumanely branded his initials J.K.P. into slaves’ shoulders. (Not true, by the way.)

**VICTOR:** Polk

### “Coward!”

1852: Franklin Pierce (Democrat) vs. Winfield Scott (Whig)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** The controversial Compromise of 1850, which

strengthened slave owners’ rights. Both parties supported it, but the Whigs less enthusiastically.

**LOW BLOW:** The Whigs called Pierce the “Fainting General” because he once passed out on the battlefield during the Mexican War. In fact, the fainting spell came about not from cowardice but because Pierce was suffering from an injury to his knee sustained the previous day.

**RETORT:** Democrats made fun of Scott’s pompous nature, invoking his nickname, “Old Fuss and Feathers.”

**VICTOR:** Pierce

### “Bastard!”

1856: James Buchanan (Democrat) vs. John C. Frémont (Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** Slavery. Democrats sought to maintain the status quo; the new Republican party was strongly against slavery.

**LOW BLOW:** Democrats played up the fact that Frémont was born out of wedlock and that he opposed slavery. Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise declared he’d march an army into Washington and overthrow the government if Frémont was elected.

**RETORT:** Republicans claimed Buchanan’s age and bachelorhood made him unfit for the presidency, and they called him “Ten-Cent Jimmy” because he once said that 10 cents a day was a fair wage for manual workers. They also claimed Buchanan’s custom of tilting his head – the effect of palsy, it is now believed – was the result of an attempt to hang himself.

**VICTOR:** Buchanan

### “Ape!”

1864: Abraham Lincoln (Republican) vs. George McClellan (Democrat)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** How to end the Civil War. Republicans sought nothing less than a full military victory over the Confederacy. Democrats wanted to negotiate peace and end the war.

**LOW BLOW:** Democrats threw everything they could think of at Lincoln, calling him a buffoon, ape, idiot, tyrant, a teller of dirty jokes, and, for good measure, an incompetent commander-in-chief. Democratic supporters published a pamphlet falsely claiming Lincoln was encouraging Irish immigrants, then viewed as the lowest-of-the-low white citizens, to marry former slaves.

**RETORT:** Republicans publicized McClellan’s repeated, costly failures as commander of the Union army. They also argued that voting against Lincoln was an act of disloyalty.

**VICTOR:** Lincoln

### “Traitor!”

1872: Ulysses S. Grant (Republican) vs. Horace Greeley (Democrat)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** Reconstruction. Greeley’s party wanted to end Reconstruction – essentially withdrawing Federal troops from the South. A secondary issue was civil service reform, with Greeley, a newspaper editor, calling for an end to the



“Hey, here’s a good deal! If we buy something they’ll stop sending catalogs for a week!”

“spoils system” of handing out government jobs as political favors.

**LOW BLOW:** Republican artist Thomas Nast portrayed Greeley as a traitor in a series of bitter cartoons. In one, he shows Greeley shaking hands with the ghost of John Wilkes Booth over Lincoln’s grave. In another, Greeley is handing over a black man to the Ku Klux Klan, which has just murdered a black mother and her child.

**RETORT:** Democrats called Grant a dictator and drunkard and produced a booklet calling the Grant administration a “crowning point of governmental wickedness ... bribery and corruption have seized all the avenues of public life; robbery, murder and assassination are of daily occurrence, and guilty perpetrators escape through the solemn mockery of law.”

**VICTOR:** Grant

**FOOTNOTE:** Worn down by the stress of the campaign, Greeley’s health gave out. He was dead before all the electoral votes were counted.

### “Lecher!”

**1884:** Grover Cleveland (Democrat) vs. James G. Blaine (Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** Charges of corruption in the Republican party, which had held the White House for 24 years and had sponsored a tariff that favored business interests.

**LOW BLOW:** Republicans publicized the fact that Cleveland had been paying child support to a widow, branding him “lecherous” and a “debaucher.” At rallies, Republicans would chant, “Ma! Ma! Where’s my pa?”

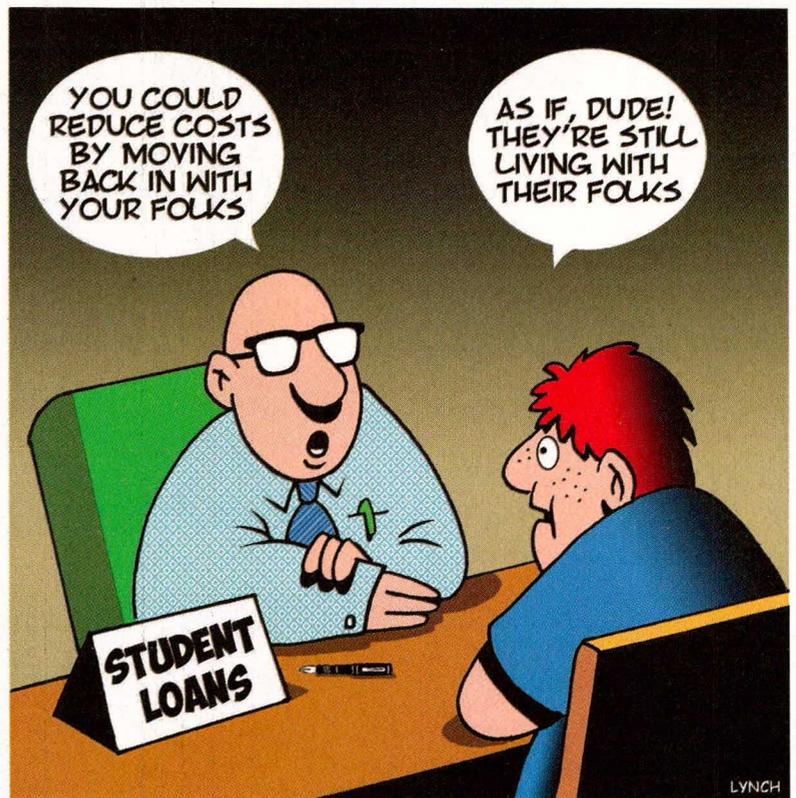
**RETORT:** Democrats obtained a letter from Blaine to an attorney for one of the railroads that alluded to improper business dealings. The letter closed with the admonition, “Burn this letter!” which became a rallying cry for the Democrats.

**VICTOR:** Cleveland

### “Empty Suit!”

**1948:** Harry S. Truman (Democrat) vs. Thomas Dewey (Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** The spread of communism and, at home, civil rights.



**LOW BLOW:** Behind in the polls, Truman felt he had nothing to lose by going on the attack. He ridiculed Dewey for being no more than a puppet of the Republican party and a stooge for corporate interests. He charged that Wall Street Republicans were “not satisfied with being rich ... [these] gluttons of privilege ... want an administration that will assure privilege for big business, regardless of what may happen to the rest of the nation.”

**RETORT:** Dewey, in trying to maintain his lead, never attacked Truman directly. But J. Edgar Hoover ordered his agents to dig up dirt on Truman. He found ties to a corrupt Missouri politician and suspicions of communists in the administration, but it wasn’t enough to damage Truman’s appeal.

**VICTOR:** Truman

### “Warmonger!”

**1964:** Lyndon B. Johnson (Democrat) vs. Barry Goldwater (Republican)

**REAL ISSUE OF THE DAY:** The Cold War.

**LOW BLOW:** Democrats portrayed Goldwater as dangerous, impulsive, and reactionary – a president who might very well start World War III. All

they had to do was cite his public statements, including this one: “I’d drop a low-yield atomic bomb on the Chinese supply lines in North Vietnam.” The famous “daisy” ad that forever tarred Goldwater as a potential instigator of WWII never mentioned the senator by name, but simply portrayed a small girl in a field, plucking the petals off a daisy, and then zoomed in to an image of a mushroom cloud. “Vote for President Johnson on November 3,” the ad urged viewers. “The stakes are too high for you to stay home.”

**RETORT:** Goldwater’s followers promoted a book titled *A Texan Looks at Lyndon*, which accused the president of involvement in the murder of men who could testify against his business associates. Goldwater himself inferred in his speeches that Johnson was a crook: “To Lyndon Johnson, running a country means buying and bludgeoning votes. ... It means building a private fortune. ... It means craving and grasping for power – more and more and more, without end.”

**VICTOR:** Johnson

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