

# Why Kerry Lost



BY JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI, APR, FELLOW PRSA

America is run by those who show up at the polls every four years. Elections themselves are fundamentally math and communications problems. On many levels it's that simple — without any of the varnishing, puffing and bloviating of the American editorial and punditry machine. Get the language and ideas right, and the numbers will work out.

As a Minnesota native, I recall the wise words of Hubert H. Humphrey, one of the state's favorite sons, who was vice president under Lyndon Johnson and who ran unsuccessfully for the presidency at least twice: "The last time to try teaching democracy is during an American presidential election campaign." The 2004 election reinforced this reality.

Presidential election years should be wonderfully op-

timistic times in America, because national elections are about the future. This was the first fundamental problem with John Kerry's candidacy. He failed to energize the nation's optimism throughout his campaign. He was the candidate from the past, about the past, running backward. Maybe after the 2004 Presidential Election, the Vietnam War can be officially over — at least as the sad centerpiece of major political campaigns. Ironically, Kerry's demise had its roots in something uttered by George H.W. Bush during his unsuccessful attempt for a second term, when he commented about the fact that he "wasn't very good at the 'vision thing.'" The vision thing is everything in a presidential campaign.

## Political vision deficiency

Kerry may have failed before he began. There was qual-

itative evidence of his difficulties well before his campaign commenced. Few senators have been elected president — far more governors have been. Kerry's perspective and record are examples of how members of this special group of people (the U.S. Senate) think. In my opinion, they each believe they could be a better president than the incumbent. A senator's vulnerability is having a public record on a wide variety of issues that can be discovered, debated, dissected, distorted, even derided. Yet, it's a record that is largely irrelevant to most of the country. Irrelevancy and vision deficiency are serious political deficits to overcome.

In 2004, the political scale was often partially balanced by debate of the incumbent president's own record.

### The missing bridge to somewhere

Kerry's model could have been Bill Clinton. Now, before you question this, remember that if Clinton was anything, he was a leader, visionary presenter and thinker. Clinton's major power was as a visionary, and he connected with people through his naturally empathetic verbal skills. If Clinton were legally allowed to have a third term, a number of polls say he'd have a significant shot at being re-elected. His popularity remains extraordinarily high (across the center of the political spectrum, at least).

Aside from "It's the economy, stupid," Clinton's major campaign theme, almost from the beginning, was about what he called "a bridge to the 21st century." He spoke in the future tense. Clinton translated almost every question, issue or circumstance he faced, even his own adversity, into how it impacted people, special groups or society — into those things we care about. His rhetoric has been studied extensively.

### Compassion deficit disorder

Kerry also suffered from compassion deficit disorder. His world seemed defined by only two events. The first is Vietnam — his most powerful life experience, which drives his behavior, thinking and attitudes. This is a war that doesn't resonate with those who came after it. When my children, who are in their 30s, hear me talking about war, their first questions are, "Dad, which war are you talking about? What's the number or the name?" No one I know wants to go back and do Vietnam over. My two closest friends in life died there, in military accidents. The second defining event is, of course, Kerry's membership in America's most exclusive club, the U.S. Senate. When a senator talks, what gets talked about is the Senate. Politically, this is facing backward.

This political posture fosters an extremely defensive style — full of negative images that come across as smug, arrogant, self-approving or self-anointing. A handful of examples from Kerry's concession speech demonstrate this point. They reflect the nature of his campaign and his failure to connect even with segments of his own base.

Here are three general examples: Kerry used the words "I" or "I'll" more than 50 times in his concession speech. This technique means Kerry is talking to himself about himself, ignoring his audience. He ran for himself, and he lost for himself. The concession speech should have been about America, but it was about John Kerry's failure.

The second example is that Kerry used the words "we" or "us" only 17 times in 900 words. Again, Kerry talked more about himself than about those who engaged in the struggle with him. The most striking aspect of Kerry's concession speech, and a striking aspect of his entire candidacy, is its negative tone. In a presentation that ran just over six minutes, he used 22 negative phrases and mindless inflammatory images that communicated nothing, and were whiny and defensive.

Here are some examples; in the order in which they occurred in the speech (with alternate positive equivalents):

- "You just have no idea . . ." (Here's what happened . . .)
- "I'm sorry that we got here a little bit late . . ." (Like our campaign, we arrived a little late . . .)
- "We talked about the danger of division in our country . . ." (The division in our country lies mostly inside the Beltway . . .)
- "The desperate need for unity . . ." (Our unity is in seeking a better future . . .)
- "We cannot win this election . . ." (We need to move on to the next election . . .)
- "No one did this with more grace and with courage and candor . . ." (They had amazing courage and candor . . .)
- "It was unbelievable." (It was powerful.)
- "Thanks to my absolutely unbelievable and dedicated staff." (. . . dedicated, committed and loyal staff.)
- "There's so much that America never gets to see." (What matters is what happens in the voting booth.)
- "Don't lose faith." (Keep the faith.)
- "It's worth fighting for." (Worth winning for.)
- "I'll never forget you." (Your sacrifices will live in my heart forever.)
- "I'll never stop fighting for you." (Your struggle will always be my struggle.)
- "You may not understand completely . . ." (Here's what's important to understand.)

- "There are no losers." (Put your energy into moving forward.)
- "...Without remorse or recrimination... without anger or rancor..." (Let's move forward with energy, confidence and commitment.)
- "No one thought it was possible." (We challenged all odds and made it a close race.)
- "I'll never forget the wonderful people who came to our rallies." (The memories of all of the wonderful people who rallied with us will live in my heart forever.)

### A man without a heart

What we needed to see during Kerry's campaign was some emotion, some sense of real feeling. Humphrey re-

turned to Minnesota in 1978, dying of cancer, and spoke at a Democratic Party fundraiser (his last public appearance). In the middle of his bombastic oratory, about the power and



Emotional rescue: What would have happened if John Kerry showed more real feeling on the campaign trail?

grandeur of America, he began to cry. He stopped his talk, abruptly looked at his adoring audience and said, "A man without a tear is a man without a heart." A tear from Kerry during this campaign might have been a powerful contrast against an opponent who made few mistakes campaigning, and who frowned and scowled a lot.

If given the choice between a candidate who scowls and a candidate who inspires, I'd like to believe that we'd follow the light instead of the darkness. ■

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# What would Bill Clinton have done?

## Kerry's concession speech reimagined as if it were given by Clinton

Dear friends and supporters, and my fellow Americans, we have come to the end of an amazing and important American journey. It's a different destination than the one we planned, but we arrive together, united in spirit, united in our cause and united in our commitment to the United States of America.

The president and I had a conversation a couple of hours ago. We offered our congratulations and our commitment to move the country forward, constructively, recognizing that the principal divisions reflected in the election will be played out here in the nation's capital. The rest of America will go back to work tomorrow, move on with their lives and resume their hopes and dreams.

We had a good conversation. I reminded him that there may come a day when he'll wish that at least one of the two houses of Congress had gone to the Democrats. Quite often when it's your own people who have all the power in every position, gridlock occurs on issues that matter.

The president spoke of healing. My thinking was more toward moving into the future in the way all Americans expect from their leadership, but with loyal, aggressive opposition.

There are so many to thank for this extraordinary exercise in democracy. While I would love to spend time thanking special people in hundreds of towns and cities all across

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