

# Hail to the Chiefs



On the eve of the election, we take a critical look at six decades of presidential branding.

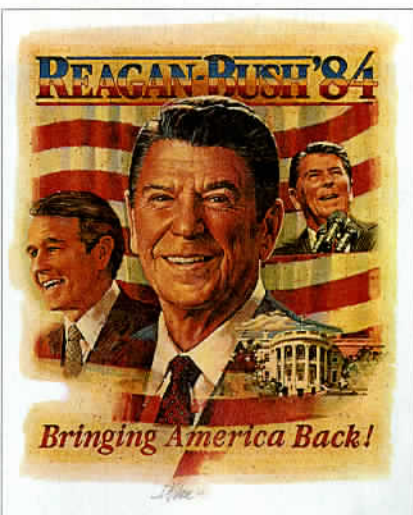
by **Steven Heller**

Welcome to the 2012 season of *America's Presidential Candidates Got Talent*, the hit show where two competing finalists are judged by a live television audience. To win, a candidate must juggle his fundamental beliefs without revealing something that will offend his base, while strategically attacking his challenger for real or imagined sins. ID-carrying members of the national audience are eligible to vote for the show's winner based on either the substance of the players' performance or the likability of the players' persona or image. Since the competition is broadcast as 30-second commercials, two-minute debate answers, and short televised news clips, the scales are tipped toward style over substance.

From the first presidential election in 1788, candidates were branded through slogans and images emblazoned on bills and badges that mythologized them: Jefferson was "The Man of the People"; William Henry Harrison got Americans singing "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too"; and Lincoln is always "Honest Abe"—effective rallying calls all. A candidate's image must represent their lofty beliefs and be

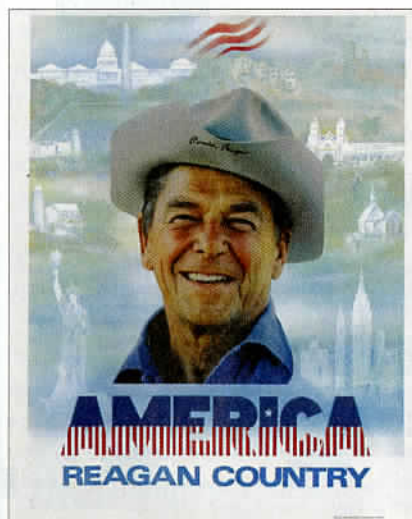
unassailably patriotic. That's why American clichés—patriotic colors, mascots, and symbols—have played an integral role in campaign materials since Washington (who ran unopposed) became our first president. In today's 24-hour news cycle, it's easier to get the words and images out than ever before, but it's much harder to spin or erase any embarrassing or campaign-ending gaffes. In the high-tech media world, traditional campaign communications are the one thing that can be controlled, manipulated and managed.

This is where campaign paraphernalia plays an important supporting role in the finalists' strategies. Never underestimate conventional campaign swag as the connective tissue that bonds the public to their respective choice and telegraphs their personal preference to fellow citizens. The most presidential of official portraits, posters, logos and slogans are the essential branding tools of any political candidate—they're the DNA of American presidential politics. We've selected a few of the most important branding blocks and offer dos and don'ts for this and future presidential campaigns. **M** / \*



Rendered in the illustration style of a Hollywood B-movie poster, this graphic is flawed by a more-is-less trope common to film industry promotions. Shove as many stars, scene vignettes, and symbols into a single one-sheet and voilà, a narrative materializes! Thumbs down.

The Gipper's fortunes changed when image-maker Michael Deaver removed Reagan's tie, opened his collar, and posed him orating impressively before the Statue of Liberty. "I've always said the only thing I did is light him well," Deaver once said. Thumbs up.



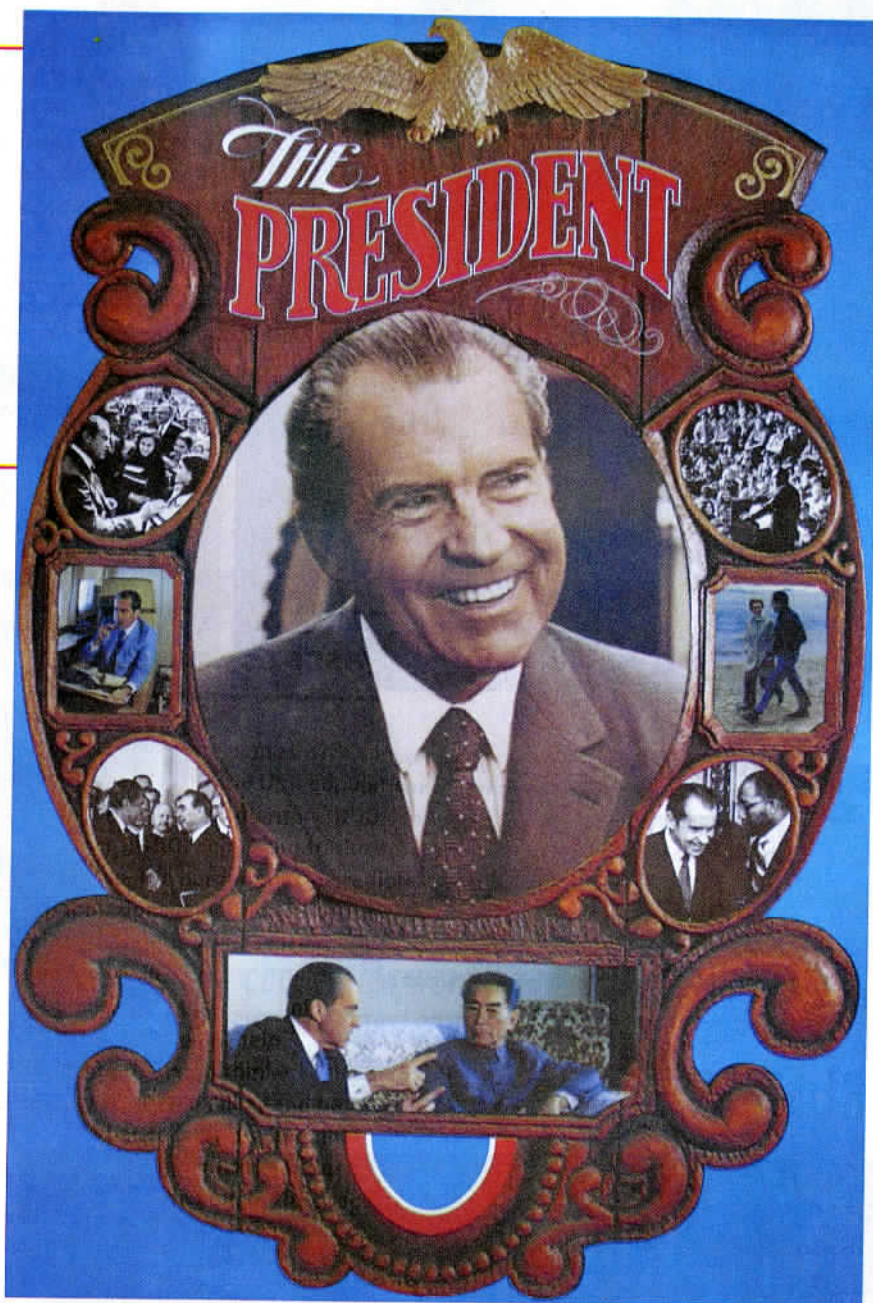




This 1972 Nixon poster attempts to be all things to all people. The retro faux wood frame is something like an Ethan Allen-ish mid-America graphic style, an attempt to showcase his homespun heritage. But the photographs of Nixon's first-term accomplishments placed like a family album around the smiling portrait are trivialized by this composition. Thumbs down.



Nothing says "I'm a patriot" better than an American flag backdrop—the bigger the flag the better. Picture the opening scene of *Patton* where the general on stage is dwarfed by the massive flag hung behind him. Likewise, here President Obama looks regal—yet of the people—as he saunters in front of a giant waving flag Photoshopped behind him. Thumbs up.



Photographs are not the only way to make a sturdy backdrop; type has that power too. This JFK bumper sticker has the candidate's iconic portrait covering his iconic name. During the 1960 election, Kennedy was abbreviated to JFK to echo FDR. Thumbs up.



Nixon poster, courtesy foriforber.com; Obama portrait, David Katz/courtesy Obama for America; JFK bumper sticker, courtesy John F. Kennedy Presidential Library





Official candidate headshots are routinely composed like high school yearbook photographs. The traditional head and shoulders pose, looking directly at the camera, with an American flag over the left or right shoulder can, in some instances, be sexy. Bill Clinton's "employee of the month" aspect sells him as a solid businessman with a wife and family. Handsome and self-assured, this could be a movie prop version of the official photo. Thumbs up.



There's a fan-club quality ("Our Next President"), to this Kennedy pin, showing him young and alive, sporting a come-hither smile. Thumbs up. The benign yet stern George Wallace image, which attempts to show him as a statesman rather than a states' rights man, masks his reputation as a stern segregationist. Thumbs down.



The ubiquitous Obama portrait, composed from a still by Manny Garcia and rendered in a social realist manner by Shepard Fairey, imbues the candidate with not just "hope," but real concern. Yet aloofness is also implicit, which is why a second iteration of the poster shows him with a *Mona Lisa* smile.

# BUMPER STICKERS



The 1972 "Nixon's the One" couldn't be better; it's just the perfect length and cadence for a bumper sticker. Simple, to the point, and in the days before Watergate, it had only one meaning (afterwards it was a double entendre). Thumbs up.



The 1988 Dukakis sticker squanders the opportunity to make a statement. Its awkward novelty typography does not enhance the message. When Kennedy, and later Nixon, used only their last names, it was bold and clear, but this treatment underscored Dukakis's bad typographic taste. Thumbs down.



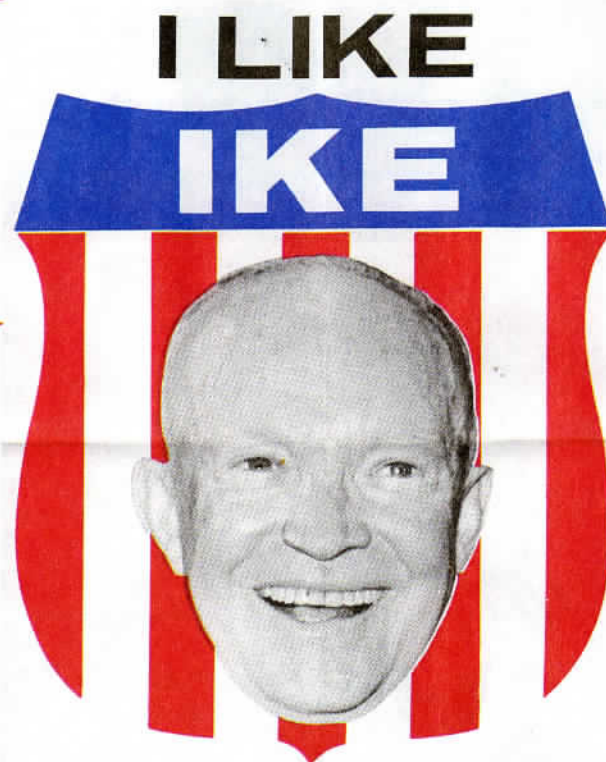
Bumper stickers are the original tweets (except with fewer characters). This 1964 "LBJ for the USA" message presages the anti-Vietnam War incantation, "Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill yoday?" It sums up in just a few letters why Johnson should and would be president. Thumbs up.

Clinton poster, courtesy zazzle.com; JFK button, courtesy John F. Kennedy Presidential Library; Wallace button, courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History; Montgomery, Alabama; LBJ bumper sticker, courtesy zazzle.com; Dukakis bumper sticker, courtesy zazzle.com





Really memorable slogans are the mantras of the campaign ritual. "I like Ike" was simple and direct compared to his opponent Adlai Stevenson, who was characterized as an intellectual or "egghead," whereas you had to like Ike. Thumbs up.



**FOR PRESIDENT**  
No. 8 of 35 Campaign Posters © T.C.O. PRTO. IN U.S.A.

*From the first presidential election in 1788, candidates were branded through slogans and images emblazoned on bills and badges that mythologized them.*



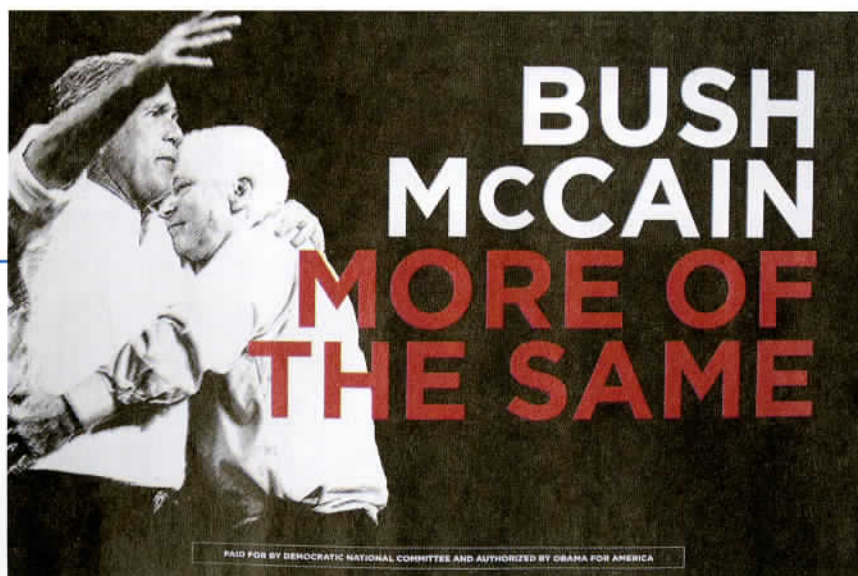
"Hillary—Smart Choice" can swing both ways. On the positive side, she's smart and for women's choice, which makes her a smart choice too. On the negative side, the slogan sounds like the breakfast cereal. Thumbs up.



"A Safer World" is so universal it doesn't matter which candidate adopted it, although it was George W. Bush. How can one argue with safety for all people, unless it comes at a price too high to pay? Thumbs up.



As rhymes go, "Bush/McCain: More of the Same" is a killer. McCain hated Bush for attacking his stepdaughter during the 2000 campaign, yet this slogan links them together like nightmare conjoined twins. Thumbs up.



PAID FOR BY DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE AND AUTHORIZED BY OBAMA FOR AMERICA