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The Conventionality of Anticandidates

In a special edition of *Rolling Stone* in 2000, author David Foster Wallace was commissioned to follow candidate John McCain on the Trail for two weeks to get the inside scoop on the inner workings of an anticanditate's campaign. McCain had the reputation during this election of being a sort of outlier, a candidate wired differently from his predecessors, and a politician given the label of an "anticandidate". David Foster Wallace challenges readers of his article "Up, Simba" to consider how media portrays the character of politicians, how reliable information from the media is, and how to find the truth in this time filled with fake news and ever changing political strategy. Although John McCain was regarded in the media as a candidate who diverged from normal political tactics, Wallace notes in his essay that even McCain's campaign did not go without the overarching bias that comes with attempting to ensure a candidate receives the best possible chance at the presidency.

What appealed to many young voters in the 2000 presidential campaign, and what David Foster Wallace found intriguing about McCain, is that he took a stance of juxtaposing the nation's preconception that politicians are dishonest and self-serving by marketing himself as: someone who "will always. Tell you. The truth" (188). In doing this, McCain drew in voters from all demographics that appreciated his candor and unrelenting habit of putting others before himself. Even with this air of truthiness and his seemingly idealistic approach to honest politics, it is key to remember why McCain is using this strategy in the first place. Wallace reminds us

that McCain is running as an anticandidate, and an anticandidate refers to a member of the campaign that refuses to succumb to all of the baggage attached with being a run of the mill politician, or in his own words, someone "who wants your vote but won't whore himself to get it, and wants you to vote for him *because* he won't whore" (160). The facade of being a politician that tells it like it is, and someone who is not spinning the media in his favor falls apart when considering how McCain's past as a Prisoner of War is marketed by his press throughout his campaign.

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, perhaps the most recognizable feature of McCain's candidacy and the cornerstone for his press's marketing strategy is the recollection of his experience has a POW during the Vietnam War. Wallace prompts readers to consider that "This gives him the moral authority both to utter lines about causes beyond self-interest and to expect us . . . to believe he means them" (166). But even through this push to put our faith in McCain, voters can not expect the "Straight Talk Express" to be completely nonpartisan in their claims. McCain's POW past and his tendency to say "things are manifestly true but which no other mainstream candidate will say" have been spun by media in ways greater than young voters may be willing to admit, which is speaks to Wallace's purpose of drawing this pattern to the attention of readers (162). In his essay, Wallace mirrors how McCain approaches the campaign from an antithetical place of candor by rendering himself as cognisant and sympathetic to the readers' apathetic attitude toward politics, which in itself speaks to how information is tailored for various audiences. And thus, through reminding readers that McCain's candor is merely a component of the larger agenda of claiming the presidency, Wallace addresses how most aspects of politics should not be taken at face value.

Through exploring the nuances of McCain's campaign, Wallace fosters a correlation between his stance as "Not a Political Journalist" and McCain's anticandidacy to show young voters that not every politician or political journalist is out to deceive them. By creating separation between themselves and others in their respective fields, both McCain and Wallace persuade people to engage in politics and to follow the lead of someone that stands apart from the pack. One of McCain's campaign trademarks was being someone that will "always, Tell you. The truth", which is essentially why he has accumulated a following of young voters (188). The younger generations of Americans have grown up seeing elected officials on trial for perjury and hearing their parents talk about how the promises of the politicians they voted for have fallen through, which is why so many of these young people feel disinclined to cast their ballot. Young voters want the facts, which is why David Foster Wallace steps up to be the one to share the campaign from his perspective as "the truth as one person saw it" without any trace of "partisan moves or conservative agenda" motivating or skewing his take on the election. (157). In either scenario, both McCain and Wallace intend to convey that they are doing a service for the people without the extra spectacle, they are separating fact from fiction and drama from politics.

In "Up, Simba" there is a slow and steady progression of Wallace using McCain's candidacy narrative in hopes to persuade the audience to vote in response to finding a perspective empathetic to being a young voter at the turn of the century. In this process, readers foster a comradery with Wallace because he showcases his understanding of the intended reader's struggle through his distinctive writing voice and anomalous approach to writing about politics. In the development of this relationship, Wallace's essay morphs from "the truth as one person saw it" into a plea for young people to employ their political values and cast them on election day (157). Phrases such as "there is *no such thing as not voting*: you either vote by

voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard's vote" are used to show Wallace's shared desire for young people to realize the impact they could have on the country (207).

Wallace uses the developmental structure of his essay to showcase microcosmically how the establishment of trust through formation of relationship can lead to subconscious manipulation. Readers often find that the "Substantially Farther Behind the Scenes than You're Apt to Want to Be" is unnecessary and relentlessly detailed. However, Wallace's underlying intention in this section it to vividly paint the picture for readers on the extent to which the information voters are getting has been altered as a result of being filtered through the campaign press. This behind the scenes look gives readers of *Rolling Stone* a look at just how many people are dedicated to portraying McCain as an honorable war hero and unexpectedly honest politician. With that being said, there is an important distinction that Wallace is making in reference to how voters see politicians and the actual character of those politicians. Although McCain may be a war hero and an uncharacteristically honest politician, Wallace highlights how his press crew is working long hours to convince Americans that the McCain they see is the best version of himself.

After reading through the first few sections of "Up, Simba", readers may begin to see a pattern of differing motivations between Wallace and other journalists or McCain and other candidates, but the insider view of the campaign that Wallace provides also shows intrinsic differences between the motives of McCain's own campaign press. Readers see how down to earth the tech crew is in comparison to the press doing their otherworldly "Cellular Waltz . . . like the cogs of some strange diffuse machine" and begin to put more weight behind the opinions and observations of the tech crew because they seem vastly more relatable (197) . This

inadvertent choosing of teams comes with the process of deciphering through the complexities of Wallace's essay, and in wondering how valid any of our information actually is. In light of looking into the campaign from this behind the scenes perspective, readers peek into how dissociated most of the media seems from the voting public, which gives rise to how Wallace illuminates the validity of the tech crew's knowledge. Many of the details of their work seem mundane, but the fact that their firsthand perspectives are untainted by the media plays into their credibility. In the section of the essay entitled "Negativity" Wallace suggests that his young readers entertain the idea that voting is meaningful by including the opinion of an NBC cameraman. He goes on to explain that when McCain was facing losing voters by retaliating against a negative comment made by George W. Bush, voters get "cynical and disgusted with the whole thing they don't even bother to vote" (206). This marks the climax of Wallace's push for readers to vote, by granting the tech crew a sense of normalcy readers can feel as if they are not alone in discovering some truth in politics, for they now have Wallace and also a background source to place their confidence in.

Underneath all of the multifaceted layers of "Up,Simba" lies the simple question regarding the trustworthiness of news sources relaying information about politics and the significance of the media on the 2000 presidential election. Near the end of the essay Wallace addresses this same skepticism in saying "At the times your cynicism is winning, you'll find that it's possible to see even McCain's most attractive qualities as just marketing angles" (229). Here even the most un-political politician of his time, *the* anticandidate and his campaign as a whole can appear phony. How can the press get away with headlining McCain's campaign with the nightmarish details of his past as a prisoner of war? It can seem that politics is hardly is a science or way of giving the legislation back to the people, and with such a heavy influence by media,

politics is no less dramatized than the crime dramas on prime time TV. Thus Wallace wants to ensure readers that he knows young people are frustrated, and that media can only expedite their frustrations, which is why he is giving his own factual account of his experience coupled with a push to get educated and involved.

In his essay, David Foster Wallace is not attempting to dissuade readers away from politics altogether, but rather encourage them to err on the side of caution when making political decisions. He does this by emphasizing how even McCain, who is running as a populist anticandidate, known for being unrefined by media and strikingly honest has a team behind him altering his portrayal to his benefit. Wallace reinforces this theme in: "The point… is that there's a tension between what John McCain's appeal is and the way that appeal must be structured and packaged in order to get him elected" (231). In "Up Simba" readers are asked to analyze how much influence media has on politics and how this can alter the reliability of the information we use to make informed decisions. Through Wallace's connection with readers and the structure of detail in his essay, the audience questions their larger preconceptions about politics by examining how opinion can be transfigured even within the tight bounds of this piece. Although Wallace acknowledges the complexity in how information is altered by campaigns and distributed to voters through the media, "Up, Simba" is Wallace's attempt to approach the topic of politics from a stance of neutrality while quietly persuading his audience to vote.

Works Cited

Wallace, David Foster. “Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate.” *Consider the Lobster*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2006. pp. 156-234