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The Use of Film Analysis in Political Consulting: Public Relations Strategy for Presidential Health Care Policy

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The Use of Film Analysis in Political Consulting: Public Relations Strategy for Presidential Health Care Policy

Abraham Lincoln said, "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed." As one of the most significant Presidential leaders in United States history, Lincoln recognized the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the American people. Receiving the approval of the general public greatly affects both the short-term political strength of an administration and the long-term historical judgment of a President's legacy. To mobilize favorable public opinion, Presidents must be able to monitor with accuracy what the public wants and must be able to communicate well with the public to persuade and to generate policy support (Edwards 92).

Passage of significant national policy items almost always requires joint cooperation between the President and Congress. When the President or his policies receive low approval ratings from the public, members of Congress will seldom take a political risk to support unpopular or marginal issues. As political parties become weaker, coalitions of opinions have tended to form more around individual issues than larger party platforms encompassing several issues. Therefore, new coalitions are built with each new issue, making the need for maintenance of high approval ratings more crucial than ever (Edwards 322).

While the need for high approval from the public is greater than ever, chief executives have always sought good publicity. As early as the first century, Caesar commanded that statues of himself be made and placed throughout the Roman Empire to "enhance his image." This practice of image enhancement continued through history as the images of rulers were minted on coins and printed on stamps. However, business leaders were the first people to hire modern public relations specialists for assistance. Boston railroad companies chartered a company in 1900 called

the Publicity Bureau, which was charged with counteracting public criticism of company operations (Biagi 254).

With the advent of World War I, the Committee on Public Information was established to organize the public relations effort by the government to build consensus for the war effort. Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first American President to hire professional public relations consultants to sell policy. In the promotion of the New Deal, he hired Louis McHenry Howe to advise him on projecting the stability and assurance needed to sell the public on his plan. Throughout his administration, Roosevelt showed a remarkable facility for using radio, the primary form of mass communication in the 1930's, to win popular support, most notably illustrated by his "fireside chats" (Biagi 255).

As television became the most popular mass medium in the nation, Presidents hired public relations personnel who understood visual as well as rhetorical messages. Jack Valenti, a prominent member of the advertising business, handled public relations for the Lyndon Johnson administration and pursued a highly successful career in the motion picture industry after the conclusion of his White House work (Edwards 128). Television advertising became one of the key features of later twentieth century campaigns. The "Daisy" commercial, depicting a young girl counting daisy petals as an announcer counted toward a nuclear explosion, was an extremely controversial advertisement aired on behalf of Johnson. Implying that Goldwater's defense policies would lead to "nuclear annihilation," the advertisement was pulled by the campaign almost immediately after its initial airing because of its controversial nature, but the message was circulated nonetheless through television news coverage of the story (Wilson 310).

The public relations presidency evolved astronomically with the administration of Ronald

Reagan. As a former actor, Reagan had a lifetime of experience with communicating professionally. His deputy press secretary Leslie Janka said, "This was a P.R. outfit that became President and took over the country." Like Johnson, Reagan hired campaign strategists from the advertising world. Hal Riney, creator of the Bartles and Jaymes wine cooler ads featuring the characters Frank and Ed, produced the "It's Morning in America" theme for Reagan's 1984 campaign. Both advertisements utilized "homespun, ordinary, unpretentious" people, targeting audiences that traditionally did not consume wine or vote Republican in large numbers (Nimmo 68). Beginning with the Reagan administration and carrying over to the Bush and Clinton presidencies, "more than one-third of the people who work in the White House have been involved in public relations activities of one type or another." (Edwards 399).

These public relations professionals working for Presidents carefully cultivate image, which is the appearance, style, and tone projected by a person or object as perceived by members of the public (Wilson 305). Measuring public opinion and communicating Presidential opinion in a way that resonates favorably with the public are the two chief tasks of White House public relations staff. To communicate with the public, direct mail appeals, media events, and television advertisements are some of the most effective means used in both election campaigns and governance. Direct mail, targeting the mailing lists of organizations "friendly" to Presidential concerns, motivates people to vote or to express opinions to Congress on policy questions (Miroff 253). Media "events" designed to portray the President in a favorable light during free television time, such as a newscast or talk show, also generate public support, such as the Bush announcement of the Clean Air Act during his vacation to Grand Tetons National Park

(Wayne 131). Town meetings, televised forums in which ordinary citizens engage in dialogue with the President, have also been used recently as a valuable communication tool by President Clinton. Comfortable in an "unscripted," spontaneous environment, Clinton has been able to project images of populism, popular democracy, and compassion and is treated with "greater deference" by ordinary citizens than by professional journalists (Miroff 376).

As Stan Le Roy Wilson notes about television commercials, "Whatever its faults, at least the 30-second spot seems to reach the masses" (Wilson 320). Designed to"sell images rather than discuss issues," television advertising provides the most direct means for candidates to reach the largest number of voters in an unfiltered forum. Former American Political Science Association president Austin Ranney notes, "television does not necessarily depict reality, but TV's reality has become the reality in politics." Therefore, producing effective television advertising is key to the success of modern political interaction with the public (Wilson 319).

Determining what the general public talks, reads, and thinks about is one of the primary functions performed by the mass media. Politicians must make their voices heard in this process of agenda setting to build positive public opinion toward them and their policies (Wilson 16). With modern politicians relying more heavily on public opinion than ever in the face of political parties with diminished levels of power, political consultants have become increasingly important to campaigns and to governance. To manufacture consensus and consent, consultants survey the political landscape through polling and other means and shape strategies to communicate with the public through advertising and press relations. Many consultants, such as Bob Teeter from the Bush administration and James Carville from the Clinton administration, have become celebrities in their own right and are more accountable to the individual clients they represent than their

affiliated parties as a whole (Miroff 251).

Polling is one of the most widely used techniques these consultants use to measure public opinion. Every Presidential administration since John F. Kennedy has hired a polling firm to gauge public opinion. Surveying a variety of people and identifying patterns in public thought, polls enable Presidents to obtain general ideas of public satisfaction and displeasure about different issues and practices (Edwards 95). Public opinion polls also "stress the public's immediate reaction to an event and dramatic but short-lived changes in the public mood," valuable in the "horse race" environment of an election campaign or in the immediate time period before widely publicized and monitored Congressional votes (Miroff 163).

However, polling has several prominent disadvantages. Public opinion is seldom "crystallized or coherent" and is usually less "informed" than that of public officials. Many views held by the public contradict one another, and polling data offers little insight in delineating the subtleties inherent in these viewpoints (Edwards 94). By forcing respondents to answer "yes or no" questions, polls do not allow for "qualified" answers that can shift the contours of public opinion considerably (Miroff 161). Answering yes or no also does not gauge the "intensity with which opinions are held," failing to account for minority opinion that may produce a majority of the public action on the issue. Finally, semantic biases greatly affect the accuracy of poll results. For example, only thirteen percent of the public responded in a contemporary poll that spending on "government welfare" programs should increase. However, fifty-seven percent of respondents felt that spending on "assistance for the poor" was "not enough." Although the programs in question were identical, the results showed tremendous disparity in polling data (Edwards 95).

Because polling does not accurately monitor trends of public opinion over long-term periods

of time and does not effectively portray the subtleties, intensities, and contradictions of public views, modern political consultants have sought alternative methods of interpreting public opinion to supplement polling. Preparing for the 1996 Clinton re-election campaign, political consultant Dick Morris hired advisors, such as feminist writer and thinker Naomi Wolf, to monitor public opinion through the interpretation of popular culture, which consists of the films, television, books, magazines, art, music, and "resonant ad images" that comprise the mainstream media of interaction with and interpretation of the world in which people live. According to Wolf, "In the end, voters reveal their deep-down wishes not in conversations they have with pollsters but in the stories they seek out to explain their lives" (Wolf 74).

Not only does analysis of the popular culture show what the public wants, but the process also illustrates the means of communication that will resonate with the public. Especially in the modern world of media, journalism is packaged in a dramatic format as stories (Miroff 198). Public yearnings are expressed through fantasy, a picture of the world that "substitutes a simplified, single reality for the complex" and has "dramatic" qualities packaged in a narrative form (Nimmo 9). When these fantasies "endure through generations," they become myths, "credible, dramatic, and socially constructed pictures that people accept as permanent, fixed, and unchanging realities" (Nimmo 14). Ritual, "a series of acts that people regularly and faithfully perform" over time, reinforces the power of cultural myths and includes ceremonies like pledging allegiance to the flag or holding Presidential inaugural celebrations (Nimmo 54). Symbols, "words or objects that the source uses to elicit meaning in the mind" of listeners, are used to portray myths and to conduct rituals. The use of symbols results in a rhetorical vision, which is a response to the world "constructed from fantasy themes" that is disseminated in public

discourse (Nimmo 12). According to Dan Nimmo and James Combs, "Because it is shared, a group fantasy takes on an aura of truth that the private fantasies of individuals do not. To have one's private views shared by others constitutes a social validation of a person's image of things" (Nimmo 11).

Although films are not usually political in an explicit manner, they provide "a medium of popular learning" by presenting our "cultural myths and immediate fantasies interwoven into film narrative." When mass audiences view a film, they "have the communal experience of sharing the collective representations of our common fantasizing" (Nimmo 108). To draw mass audiences and to become profitable, films must hold the attention of the public by emotionally resonating with people.

Consulting for the 1996 Clinton re-election campaign, Naomi Wolf stated that the "traditional community under threat," portrayed in recent films, such as Phenomenon, Outbreak, and Dante's Peak, was one of the most recurrent fantasies of the baby boom generation, as recorded in popular culture. As Wolf gauges the value modern audiences place on this "traditional community," she notes that people do not care "about whether the lava is going to get the Wal Mart" in these films (Wolf 75). She further proves her observations about the value of traditional housing emphasized in modern society by pointing to other trends in popular culture. Most highly rated television shows, such as Home Improvement and King of the Hill, "focus not on an isolated family in a residential, sidewalkless subdivision but on a family in a traditional mixed-use community overrun with interacting neighbors." Wolf also observes that home and garden magazine sales are increasing in an otherwise faltering market for magazines and that books dealing with the feng shui tradition of interior decorating have become popular sellers (Wolf 74).

Relating her analysis of the popular culture to politics, she predicts politically that "the leader who gives boomers back the landscape of their childhood will be seen across the country as a local hero" (Wolf 76).

The degree of policy success that Bill Clinton has achieved in his Presidency has been based based largely on the degree of success he has obtained in his efforts to communicate effectively with the public. One of the most prominent failures experienced in the Clinton administration was his inability to gain approval for his health care reform plan. Analyst Bob Woodward blames the failure of the plan on Clinton's thwarted efforts to "structure the debate," in spite of the fact that "Bill Clinton is one of the most rhetorically skilled Presidents of this century." Exploring why the health care reform effort failed in 1993 sheds a great deal of light on the dynamics of Presidential communication with the public, both successful and unsuccessful (Edwards 337).

Clinton was not the first politician to sense the public desire for changes in the health care system. During the 1991 Pennsylvania Senate race, underdog Democrat Harris Wofford defeated Richard Thornburgh, a popular Republican with a large following. The principal theme of the Wofford campaign was the public concern with health care, and he placed special emphasis on the problems of the uninsured. One of the pivotal tools used in the winning campaign was a television commercial in which Wofford stated, "If criminals have the right to a lawyer, I think working Americans should have the right to a doctor" (Miroff 534). 1992 Presidential candidate Bob Kerrey made health care a key issue in the Democratic primary, pressuring Clinton and the other candidates to address the issue. Eventually, Clinton promised that he would present health care legislation to Congress within the first one hundred days of his Presidency, a promise he was unable to keep (Edwards 391).

Two major problems confronted Clinton as he faced the task of health care reform. Thirty-seven million people were uninsured, and health care costs were spiraling out of control, making up fourteen percent of the economy, a forty percent increase from 1980 (Miroff 533). After Clinton was sworn into office, he and policy advisor Ira Magaziner decided to institute a health care reform task force to assemble the myriad details of the plan for presentation to the public. By appointing the First Lady as the task force head, Clinton raised the political stakes for himself considerably. Any failure of the proposal would be directly blamed upon his decisions. One of the first flaws in his process was the code of secrecy established. Hundreds of federal employees working at the Old Executive Office Building frequently had to deal with security problems due to the increased traffic in the building and with lack of space in meeting rooms. This secrecy also meant that there was no central directory available to these employees to contact one another (Thompson 62). Republicans protested the closed door policy, sued on the basis that government meetings should be open, and forced the task force to accommodate their staff after winning the lawsuit (Wayne 392).

The resulting proposal issued by the task force totaled 1,342 pages, and the campaign adopted a "war room" of consultants to assist with selling the plan (Clift 40). Initially, the public and Congress were stunned by the magnitude of the plan, and the reaction had "all the dynamics of a college mixer: tentative advances, no commitments" (Cooper 26). Some components of the plan included a three-level system of insurance purchasing centered around the formation of health insurance alliances, electronic billing, flexibility for states in their choice of plans, financial relief for companies with high levels of insurance spending, and insurance subsidies for small businesses (Goodgame 56). Other parts of the proposal included increased federal subsidies for

prescription drugs, more mental health care, price caps on the medical industry, and increased care for the elderly (Goodgame 57). To sum up the details of this plan for the public, Clinton presented the package with six components: security, simplification, savings, quality, responsibility, and choice (Cooper 25). Lack of support from the public and Congress is the primary reason why the Clinton plan for health care reform failed, and three central reasons explain why they let the plan die in the legislative branch. The task force plan was too large, too unfocused, and too impersonal on an emotional level to gain the needed support.

Logistical problems with the task force and the sheer number of pages that their report eventually numbered made the plan enormously complicated. Even the President commented that he "thought about this until my brain aches" (Clift 40). Senate and House members attended a "health care university" with briefing sessions by Hillary Clinton, Ira Magaziner, and others involved with the task force to educate themselves about the overwhelmingly complex proposal. The gigantic list of details would prove to be one of the weakest points of the plan from both legislative and public relations perspectives. Almost anyone speaking would favor the idea of general reform, while nearly every detail was criticized by different interests (Church 34).

Another drawback of the plan was the lack of focus exhibited by White House public relations officials. Too many other items on the Presidential agenda that year had extended the public attention in too many directions to be effective. Economic and budgetary issues, national service, child immunization, campaign finance reform, and gays in the military all took time away from health care (Edwards 400). Personalizing the subject of health care with stories of Americans without insurance or access to quality care was one of Clinton's most effective sales techniques.

However, the insistence on publicizing the policy aspects of the plan in equal time with the emotional aspects caused the effort to lose a great deal of momentum (Duffy 28). Rivals of the plan, such as the American Medical Association were coached very carefully about how to present their angles most effectively in the mass media. Doctors and national media representatives were coached at an August seminar in Chicago about how to react to the proposal. Speaking in sound bites was one topic covered, and they learned catch phrases such as, "The AMA doesn't want to see the calculator replace the stethoscope." Clinton public relations specialists did not maintain a public focus equal to that of the opposition (Gibbs 28). Rival plans in Congress also took the focus away from the Clinton plan. Tennessee Representative Jim Cooper and Louisiana Senator John Breaux presented a more centrist plan as an alternate to Clinton's "gumbo approach," as Breaux described it (Borger 47).

Poll numbers reflecting the initial optimism over the plan nearly reversed in the months following the presentation of the Clinton plan, and public disapproval outweighed favorable opinion. Why did the numbers change so quickly? While the public still expressed support of the basic aims outlined by the President, many of their initial hesitations became magnified with negative aspects overshadowing positive ones (Church 36). The "Harry and Louise" ad campaign portrayed a middle-aged couple discussing concerns about reform such as physician choice, accumulation of government debt, and excess bureaucracy. This ad campaign has been identified by numerous analysts as the most effective attack against the Clinton proposal (Edwards 394). Funded by the Health Insurance Association of America, the campaign was produced by the insurance lobby, one of Clinton's primary opponents (Alter 34).

Because the "Harry and Louise" ad campaign resonated emotionally with the public, the insurance industry was successful in defeating the Clinton health care proposal. Members of the White House staff freely admitted the lack of ideology invested in components of the plan. One senior staffer reported, "People see this plan as a construct. There's not a deep emotional attachment to it" (Dentzer 26). Columnist Gloria Borger reported that the final plan is "a hybrid that thrills nobody and encourages factions to troll for leverage, or at least veto power" (Borger 47). While the public may have empathized with stories of people victimized by health care, inadequate numbers of people showed the same emotional response to proposed solutions.

Members of the administration did not put enough emotional emphasis in their advocacy of the Clinton plan or their criticism of alternate options. Journalist Jonathan Alter noted, "Clearer enemies might have also meant cleaner legislation." Historically, Teddy Roosevelt used this technique with great skill, drawing vast public attention with his campaign as a "trust buster." Hillary Clinton was applauded on Capitol Hill for her unflinching descriptions of health insurance company practices and the problems faced by ordinary Americans. However, most of the other administration spokespeople, including the President, did not exhibit this same skill in delineating heroes and villains in the debate. By allowing its enemies to define them and the terms of the debate, administration officials lost control of public opinion, and the bill was doomed to die in Congress (Alter 34).

Political consultants crafting a public relations strategy for the Clinton administration health care proposals could have profited from the use of film analysis as a consulting technique in two primary ways, increased insight into the public mind and better knowledge of effective communication techniques. Quick reverses in polling data illustrated only immediate reactions to

the plan, while failing to gauge more long-term trends of opinion. Values expressed in a film tend to reflect national opinion over a time span encompassing a minimum of a few years rather than the more mutable, immediate opinions expressed through polls, which can change within a matter of days or weeks. Consultants would also have learned valuable communication techniques by studying the visual and rhetorical examples in films. Entertainment professionals have a greater impetus and more time to devote to the process of assessing America's emotional state than political professionals do, making judgments by the entertainment industry generally more accurate and precise. Trained in visual and performing arts, film producers also are more experienced in selecting images, language, and themes that will resonate with the public.

The study of feature films lends itself best to analysis of the popular culture. Because films contain both visual and rhetorical images, they can yield more complete results than the analysis of images or text alone. While television and film share the quality of combined visual and rhetorical imagery, film is more practical for analysis purposes due to constraints of time and product availability. Analysts can study a wider range of footage, because films are contained, while television shows are almost always presented in an ongoing, sometimes serialized set of broadcasts. Television shows may be taped over a long period of time, while films are readily available on videocassette and may be viewed in a relatively short time span. Studying box office profits can also be used as a concrete, financial gauge of popularity and exposure within the culture.

By analyzing the popular culture in recent feature films, new conclusions have been drawn about how to present health care reform ideas more effectively to the public. The following two advertisements reflect values and utilize communication techniques derived

from feature film analysis. "Dying Young" is designed to anger the public toward opponents of reform, while "A Place at the Table" is an appeal toward the positive values people identify as American. When used in conjunction with media events, speeches, television news coverage, and other public relations tools, these advertisements will generate the emotional appeal from the public that is vital to the success of any policy campaign.

"Dying Young"

VIDEO	AUDIO
A small boy with a slightly older girl sit on a shabby sofa.	*Boy:* "Why won't Mommy and Daddy come come home and play with us?" *Girl:* "Because the doctor wants Mommy in the hospital. Daddy has to work days and nights, because we can't get any insurance."
Flash to blood dropping slowly on a photograph of a smiling family.	Beeping noises similar to a heart monitor.
A haggard lady with gray hair sits on a hospital bed beside a young mother with lesions on her face. She is holding the young woman's hand.	*Grandmother:* "I wish I could do something about this. We've done our best, but we barely get by these days."
Flash to blood dropping more rapidly on the photograph of the smiling family.	Beeping noises continue at a faster pace.
A young nurse stands with her co-worker outside the young mother's room, and they look inside through a window. The mother appears even more drawn and has more facial lesions.	*Nurse:* "How do I tell her family that she's not going to make it?"
Flash to blood nearly raining on the family photograph.	Beeping noises blur together until nearly indistinguishable.
Blood streams down the sides of the photograph. Superimposed on the image: Call Congress to support universal coverage. 1-800-555-5555.	*Announcer:* "This is how the uninsured die in America. Call Congress before it's too late."

"A Place at the Table"

VIDEO	AUDIO
Two middle-aged women are preparing a meal in a traditional kitchen with a cozy, warm atmosphere.	*Woman 1:* "What a beautiful day for the homecoming picnic! I can't believe we're all together." *Woman 2:* "I know. And I sure am glad Daddy is here with us instead of in the nursing home." *Woman 1:* "Daddy would be there today, if President Clinton and the Democrats in Congress hadn't passed home health care subsidies for working people." *Woman 2:* "They know what working families face, and they helped us keep the family together. I'm glad they stood up to those HMO's and insurance companies!" *Woman 1:* "Daddy is so happy being close to his grandchildren, and the nurse takes such good care of him, just like one of the family."
The women carry large platters of food to a long table set up in a beautiful, green yard lined with trees. Children run around with bright smiles. An elderly man in a wheelchair is wheeled to the table, wearing an immaculate white shirt and a bow tie. Everyone is dressed in his or her Sunday best and takes a seat at the table.	
The second woman greets people as they arrive.	*Woman 2:* "Reverend Jenkins! Doctor Graham, good to see you! Miss Carol and Miss Mary, have a seat."
The people assembled bow their heads briefly during grace. Then, they began serving food and engaging in conversation.	*Reverend:* "Blessings on the food we receive and those who are less fortunate."
Camera circles among the people.	*Announcer:* "In America, everyone deserves a place at the table."
Black screen with white lettering: "Call your congressman to support universal health care."	

Production of "Dying Young" and "A Place at the Table" is based on the analysis of five American feature films. As Good As It Gets, Marvin's Room, The Rainmaker, Soul Food, and Steel Magnolias are the analyzed films. Identification of heroes and villains was one of the first steps in the analysis process. By determining which figures are viewed positively and negatively, consultants can identify character types who will generate the appropriate reactions to advertisements. By observing events that recur in several films despite surface dissimilarities in the storyline, rituals are found, and consultants can inject familiarity in their ads with which people will readily connect. A shot, "what is simply recorded by a single operation of the camera," is a specific visual image that can serve as an effective trigger of emotions (Dick 36). Various shots are targeted for adaption in commercials. Sequences are "groups of shots forming self-contained segments of film that are by and large intelligible in themselves" (Dick 59). Like shots, sequences can be observed to ascertain how film producers communicate effectively with the public. Identifying heroes, villains, rituals, shots, and sequences in films leads to the discernment of myths within the work. These classic, recurring stories provide insight into the values that resonate with audiences.

Among heroes identified within the films, female caretakers are portrayed most often and most sympathetically. While men were not vilified, films clearly showed that women are considered to have greater expertise and compassion in dealing with health care crises. The ritual of keeping a vigil in hospital waiting rooms was portrayed in each film analyzed. Shots of men turning away from women and being unable to bear the emotional pain of the crises were prominent in Soul Food and Steel Magnolias, and the genders were pointedly segregated in each shot. Women bear all of the caretaking responsibility in As Good As It Gets and Marvin's

Room. In The Rainmaker, the mother of leukemia victim Donny Ray was the driving spiritual force behind the crusade against insurance companies. One of the most striking shots in Steel Magnolias shows the recently widowed Jackson leaning heavily on his mother for support. Rituals, such as the feeding of patients and the administering of medication, also emphasized the role of women as caretakers.

While female caretakers are perceived most positively, nurses and doctors are generally considered heroic, too. Shelby, the heroine of Steel Magnolias, is a nurse, and she is consistently portrayed as professional and nurturing. Although he is somewhat absentminded and detached, Dr. Wally in Marvin's Room demonstrates a personal concern for and thorough knowledge of the family's many health struggles. His humanity is further emphasized by the hiring of his learning disabled brother as an office receptionist. In a humorous yet tender sequence from the same film, Bessie, after fainting at Disney World, is treated by a doctor who is dressed as the character Goofy, radiating warmth and competence. By engendering a feeling of safety reminiscent of childhood, the actions of the doctor brought smiles to both the characters and audience. Dr. Betts, the pediatric specialist in As Good As It Gets, is not an exuberant character, but the stability, professionalism, and attention he gives to Carol and her son endear him greatly to viewers. Because female caretakers and doctors are portrayed positively, they play prominent roles in both of the commercial scripts developed.

Insurance companies are the primary villains identified in the films, and lawyers, as associated with big business interests, are also perceived negatively in Soul Food and The Rainmaker. Terri, the attorney in Soul Food, is portrayed as overly businesslike and harsh, and her sisters, who work

as a beautician and a homemaker, are much more sympathetic characters in the struggle of the family to survive the illness and death of their mother. Shots from The Rainmaker include sharks swimming in an aquarium in one of the attorney's offices and the array of wealthy lawyers lined up against the frail figure of Donny Ray before a deposition.

However, the dislike of lawyers does not begin to equal the public dislike of insurance companies. Although As Good As It Gets, Marvin's Room, and Soul Food do not personalize the industry through characterization, the financial worries of the characters are directly attributable to the greed of medical insurance companies. Referring to health insurers as "the scratch and sniff armpit of the industry," paralegal Deck Schifflet in The Rainmaker established a tone of condescension echoed throughout the films. When learning that her HMO did not cover testing procedures that could have alleviated her son's medical condition, Carol in As Good As It Gets explodes with a profane reference toward insurance companies, a reference that theatre audiences cheered. When Rudy Baylor, the young attorney in The Rainmaker, hands his client Donny Ray a sheaf of papers to sign, Donny Ray's nose begins bleeding severely. Shots of blood dripping and gushing on the paper provide a stark visual image of his martyrdom at the hands of insurance companies. The prominence of facial lesions also added visually to the heroism of his survival. "Dying Young" features the unseen but menacing presence of insurance companies in an appeal to save the uninsured, and "A Place at the Table" shows heroic female caretakers praising the President for taking on the villainous insurance industry.

Other rituals not directly used in the advertisements also played roles in the scripting process for the advertisements. Many families experiencing the ritual of nursing home visits expressed their desire for more family-centered care in the home. In Soul Food, the women argue

passionately about their resolve to keep their elderly great-uncle Pete out of the nursing home, where he would not be close to his family. Bessie and Lee, the sisters portrayed in Marvin's Room, worry about how to take care of their aging relatives in an emotional sequence involving a tour of a prospective nursing home. This yearning for home health care is highlighted in "A Place at the Table." Funeral services, rituals portrayed in The Rainmaker, Soul Food, and Steel Magnolias, express the grief and loss associated with health care crises, foreshadowed in "Dying Young."

Arguments associated with money and the sale of the family home are traumatic rituals that identify one of the major myths present in the analyzed films. Marvin's Room and Soul Food emphasize both concerns, while financial arguments also play a prominent role in As Good As It Gets. Economic worries leading to the breakdown of the family is one of the most resonant myths of modern society. Portrayed in The Rainmaker, Wanda loses a son to death and a husband to mental illness due to the lack of available health care, and she loses nearly every means of emotional support she has near the end of the film. Carol's own health in As Good As It Gets declines as she becomes overworked to pay for her son's medical bills, and her economic deliverance by Melvin's payment of her son's medical care eventually becomes the salvation of Carol and her family. In Soul Food near the conclusion of the film, the African-American family portrayed bands together to fight a kitchen fire, perhaps a metaphor for the real-life arson damage that African-American churches and communities have sustained. Once the fire is extinguished, they find the hiding place for their mother's reserve of money. This sequence, in which dollar bills are flying around the kitchen above the fans, illustrates that alleviation of economic worries

also leads to the rebuilding of the family. This myth of economic worries leading to family breakdown is used in "Dying Young," and the reverse scenario is presented in "A Place at the Table."

Soul Food's cast characterizes another of the notable myths in American society. Modern yearning for extended family and care for the family permeate the films analyzed. Grandparents or other elderly relatives are considered critical to the development of children. The Rainmaker is the only film analyzed that doesn't feature older relatives occupying valued positions in family life; these relatives are not mentioned in the film. Pregnancy announcements in Steel Magnolias and Soul Food are key rituals glorifying family, and family birthday and anniversary celebrations are important rituals in these films also, as well as Marvin's Room. As Good As It Gets, Soul Food, and Steel Magnolias feature family participation in athletics, another ritual that reinforces the myth of extended family and mutual protection illustrated in "A Place at the Table." Organ donation, a ritual included in Steel Magnolias and Marvin's Room, continues to highlight this myth.

Shots and sequences featuring family photographs further serve to underscore the importance of family care. Marvin's Room and Soul Food both utilize family photographs in their opening credits. When Hank, the abused child in Marvin's Room, sets fire to the family home, one of the most vivid shots in the sequence shows a burning picture of the family. This shot was combined with the shot of blood dropping on the paperwork in The Rainmaker to create an image for "Dying Young" that would dramatize the human toll from health care crises. A sequence from The Rainmaker, in which Donny Ray's father waves a photograph of his dead son before the faces of lawyers and jurors, also emphasizes the myth of care for one's family.

Springing from the myth of American longing for extended families is the myth of close, local communities and an ethic of caring that governs them. Religion plays a key role in this community ethic. Lee and her family are offered shelter and cared for by nuns in Marvin's Room. Characters in Steel Magnolias attend church regularly with everyone else in their community, and Soul Food incorporates elements of a strong religious tradition, including the ritual of grace before meals and inviting the pastor to Sunday dinner. Neighbors are prominent in As Good As It Gets, Steel Magnolias, and Soul Food, and the opening credits of Steel Magnolias show Annelle, who is new in town, being greeted by smiling people sitting on their front porches and working in their yards.

The myth of community is best highlighted in the ritual of family dinners. Including members of the community as well as relatives, this ritual shows unity and nurturing. Neighbors in The Rainmaker eat with Donny Ray's family after his funeral, and Miss Birdie in the same film immediately prepares a meal for Kelly, who is brought to her house to recover from her husband's abuse. Celebrations in Steel Magnolias, such as Shelby's wedding, Christmas, and birthday parties, all feature smiling people congregated around dinner tables. Preparing meals together and eating as a family around the grandfather's hospital bed reinforces family bonds and gives them strength in Marvin's Room. Soul Food explores this ritual most thoroughly. When the tradition of Sunday dinner is broken, the family breakdown is the next inevitable step. As young Ahmad gathers his family together to continue the ritual after it has been broken, their bonds as a family are affirmed, symbolizing the increase in their prosperity. As the centerpiece for "A Place at the Table," the ritual of family dinner serves as an emotional reminder to the public of the myth of community American society seeks. Centered around family and reaching out to others, this

myth defines what the public wants to hear from its political leaders. Exhibiting an understanding of this longing is vital to the success of any national policy endeavor.

American politics in the late twentieth century are dominated by the necessity of understanding public opinion and communicating well with the people of the nation. Mass media is the primary conduit for this interaction, and a thorough knowledge of its workings is essential to political effectiveness. Presidents, as the chief national communicators, bear the heaviest responsibility in the political system. The 1992 Clinton health care reform effort was one of the administration's greatest failures. Although public optimism was initially high and poll ratings were good, the public relations plan for health care reform did not adequately gauge the public's emotional response to the issue or utilize techniques of communication that resonated emotionally with the public. Rival interests, led by the health care industry formed a counterattack, and the "Harry and Louise" ad campaign became the pivotal tool for defeating the Clinton proposal.

Film analysis of the popular culture, a political consulting technique used extensively by consultant Dick Morris in the 1996 Clinton re-election campaign, provides long-term insight into the emotional perspectives of the public, and the technique, as a supplement to polling, can compensate for many of the weaknesses inherent in the polling process. "Dying Young" and "A Place at the Table" were produced using film analysis to gauge public opinion and to observe effective communication techniques used by film professionals.

Film analysis consists primarily of the identification of heroes, villains, rituals, shots, sequences, and myths that emotionally resonate with the public. Heroes identified include female caretakers and doctors, while primary villains are insurance corporations and attorneys.

Rituals, shots, and scenes further define heroic and villainous images portrayed, and some of these observations not directly used in commercial scripts still shed light on the emotional workings of public opinion. Three primary myths deduced from the film serve as the basis of the commercial scripts. Economic worries leading to family breakdown, desire to care for one's family and to remain close with extended family, and the development of a caring community are all components of modern American dreams and nightmares. From the observation of popular culture portrayed in film, "a smart politician could look at this scene and see straight into the hearts of millions of American voters" (Wolf 74).

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