

# Why the Democrats lost

A Caffeinated editorial

The Democrats lost because they lost the message. President Obama, his administration and certainly the House leadership did a poor job of communicating what they accomplished and of refuting the sometimes crack-pot ideas the Republicans, and especially the Tea Party candidates were offering.

Communications matter in shaping perception. The Tea Party was especially successful in convincing the public that Obama was “socializing” the country. The perception of the Democrats as un-American was instilled. Did Obama prove otherwise? No. He didn’t seem to grasp that how he communicated what his administration achieved was just as important as what he actually did. He didn’t make the case that the changes he made may have helped stem the recession. He also didn’t make the case that jobs were his number one priority. What was? Health care reform.

Timing is crucial in communications and in politics. If Obama had put health care on the back burner (or at least seemed to) he may have been able to say he prioritized jobs.

This mid-term election is a tremendous failure for Democrats. The Republicans were led by someone who constantly put his foot in his mouth, Michael Steele, and yet managed to win control of the House. Sarah Palin, arguably the most superficial politicians of all time, is the voice of the Tea Party on a national stage. She talks in platitudes and unsupported statements, and yet the Democrats couldn’t find a way to reduce her credibility.

Nancy Pelosi, who is a brilliant politician, failed to make the case. Obama failed to make the case. And the many incumbents who lost their seat, failed to make the case.

It all comes down to communications and having a message that is relate-able, repeatable, and that resonates with voters. Democrats did not have this in 2010.



## **Personality and style communicate**

All the advertising in the world is not going to make a frog into a prince. People respond to things personally—especially to things (like politics) that affect them directly.

In Washington DC, incumbent mayor Adrian Fenty lost the democratic primary to his opponent council member Vince Grey. Why? Partially because people preferred Grey, but in larger part, because people did not like Fenty's arrogance and leadership style. You can read an article in the Washington Post that further delves into this here.

Would you vote for someone you don't like? Probably not, even if he or she had the nicer ads, the flashier website. My advice to political strategists is people respond to people they like more than to ads they like.

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## **Editorial: The Obamas need**

# better communications advice

Editorial

From the start of the Obama presidency, I have been surprised at the lack of good communications advice given (or maybe it is received) by the president. Last year, the president irritated DC residents by saying they weren't tough enough about winter. Robert Gibbs, the current press secretary, has gotten himself in many a bad situation, most recently calling left wing critics of the president "crazy."

And then there are two more troubling, recent missteps. First, Michelle Obama chose to take a mother-daughter trip to Spain, and did so at considerable expense. The trip was roundly criticized as being in poor taste as many Americans are in dire financial straits. Kathleen Parker in today's Washington Post calls the trip "tone deaf." It's like Michelle Obama had no reality check, no perception check before embarking on her trip. I am sure that she could have found a great place to vacation, with her entourage in tow, in the United States. In my opinion, Obama's Spain trip is the result of a lack of communications counseling. Someone at the White House is not thinking in terms of public perceptions.

The other recurring and ongoing communications issue is President Obama's apparent obsession with blaming George Bush. Instead of referring to the current GOP power base, Obama keeps blaming Bush's policies for the economic slump. After nearly two years in office, this economic mess is Obama's, not Bush's. Also, as Frank Rich pointed out in the excellent New York Times opinion piece, "How to Lose an Election Without Really Trying," many ideas that Obama is saying are Bush's are not. Again, this is a lack of communications advice. People are looking for reasons to vote for the Democrats, not reasons to vote against the Republicans. Most people have lost track of George Bush and are more interested in knowing what OBAMA

is going to do.

What the White House needs is better communications advice. And stat. As midterm elections approach, people are going to be deciding to vote for Republicans or Democrats, and if the Republicans gain momentum, they may kick out Obama out of office in 2012.



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## **It's always on the record!**

As anyone who has been through media training knows, what you say to a journalist is always on the record, even if you think it's not. When you talk to a journalist, he or she is gathering information, and whether you are quoted directly or not, you have been used as a source.

Recently, there have been two widely publicized media gaffes. The most recent involves comments made by General Stanly McChrystal and his staff to Rolling Stone magazine. Those comments, widely seen as being proof of insubordination, led to McChrystal's resignation from his post as commanding officer of the war in Afghanistan.

It is hard to believe that McChrystal, a former head of Special Ops, would be so candid with a journalist not knowing his comments would make it to print. Anyone who has had as much exposure to the media would know that a journalist is always pursuing a story. In my opinion, McChrystal knew exactly what he was doing, and had his own motivations for getting on the record with his views of President Obama and the direction of the war in Afghanistan.

The other media gaffe also cost a job. I am talking of Helen Thomas and her anti-Semitic barrage, caught on video by a citizen journalist and blogger. Thomas, when asked on her views on Israel, did not hold back her contempt or her extremist views. Some have asked whether she understood the implications of talking to a non-journalist. In her fifty years plus of experience, Thomas must have come across a hand-held camera before. As a journalist herself, she knows that anything you say in front of other people can be quoted or at least, used as source material. Even if Thomas had not been captured on video, the Rabbi who interviewed her could have publicized her comments.

Because, as we said before, now more than ever, NOTHING is off the record. And all of us are going on the record all the time, on Twitter, Facebook, blogs and wherever else we are interacting. We need to be mindful that what we say can and will be used against (or for) us.

Your thoughts?



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## What was he thinking?

You've probably heard about the flap involving Bob McDonnell, Virginia's new Republican governor. McDonnell issued a proclamation calling April Confederate History Month in his state. But he had omitted a key belief of the Confederacy—its support of slavery. Naturally, there was outrage from civil rights leaders, African-Americans and the media. And guess what, McDonnell had to amend his statement to include language about slavery.

Now, I think McDonnell was speaking his mind the first time. I also think Virginia has a large racist population who would be happy to be Confederate once again. And clearly, I think the whole Confederate declaration is a ridiculous, shameful attempt to pander to the more right-wing, racist elements in Virginia. But, from a public relations perspective, I want to know what was McDonnell thinking? Indeed, was he thinking?

McDonnell either is unaware that large segments of the population consider slavery an outrage or he has really bad advisors or simply is ignorant of how the media works. Anybody could have told him that many people would be offended by this offensive proclamation. And furthermore, that the media would pick it up and tear it apart. Sure, he reacted within a day and issued a "fix" and an apology, but why on earth was the governor not aware of the furor his decision would cause?

On the one hand, I think that McDonnell probably does not realize that being associated with confederacy equals racism because he does not see that as racist. He buys the whole Confederate argument that the Civil War was a fight about states' rights. On the other hand, I also think McDonnell does not understand public perception or perhaps he lacks in the public relations advice department.

Whether on purpose, or unwittingly, McDonnell has contributed further to the perception that he is a good ol' boy, happy to maintain Virginia's commitment to Confederate ideals where African-Americans are second class citizens, if citizens at all. McDonnell did not even consider that African-Americans live in his state and that they may not share his rosy view of the importance of celebrating Confederate history.

So, what was he thinking? He was not thinking nor was he receiving any type of credible public relations advice when he issued the proclamation. Obviously, once the criticism started, his PR folks woke up or showed up to the office.

The moral of this story is that perception matters, and that if you do or say something offensive, and you are in public office, you will have to face the music.

UPDATE: Washington Post columnist Robert McCartney makes very good points in his column today.



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## How you say it

We've all heard it before, "it is not what you say, but how you say it." Well, in my opinion, it is both. What you say is also important, but how you say it makes the difference in how it is received. One person who does not seem to understand or care about this is President Obama's press secretary, Robert Gibbs. Gibbs is forever being snarky, sarcastic and just plain unpleasant. I would lay bets that most, if not all, of the White House press corps despise his guts.

In my opinion, Gibbs is one of the worst press secretaries I have ever seen. He can't answer questions straight on, he uses big words he doesn't seem to understand, but worst of all, he seems bored and above the job. This morning, I read a great column on Gibbs in the Washington Post, by Dana Milbank. Most of the time, Milbank's own sarcasm and unpleasantness make his column a must-skip, so imagine my surprise when he points out his own apparent dislike of Gibbs' snark. Here's an excerpt from the column:

*Gibbs acts as though he's playing himself in the movie version of his job. In this imaginary film, he is the smart-alecky press secretary, offering zippy comebacks and cracking jokes to make his questioners look ridiculous. It's no great*

*feat to make reporters look bad, but this act also sends a televised image of a cocksure White House to ordinary Americans watching at home.*

*This is the most visible manifestation of a larger problem the Obama White House has. Many Obama loyalists from the 2008 race still seem, after a year on the job, to have trouble exiting campaign mode. They sometimes appear to be running a taxpayer-funded rapid-response operation*

If Obama is sinking in the polls, and his agenda is failing (and now he has managed to lose a historically Democratic Senate seat, although that may have had more to do with the Democratic candidate's lack of campaign skills –Read this great blog post on it by my friends over at Fresh Ground Communications). It may have something to do with HOW the White House is communicating its message, which is poorly. Gibbs' holier-than-thou approach to everything and everyone is not helping one bit. If Obama wants to regain some footing I would suggest he replace Gibbs with someone a bit kinder, a bit gentler. Replace Gibbs with someone who gets that how you say things really does make a difference.

What are your thoughts? Do you like Gibbs? How about a poll:

[poll daddy poll=2560587]

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## **Propaganda**

Last night, I was fortunate to visit a magnificent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, entitled State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda.

As the curator explained, propaganda is inherently linked with

advertising and public relations. In the beginning of modern advertising and PR, propaganda people were running the show. Edward Bernays, the “father of modern PR” was a propagandist. But propaganda is not inherently negative. Propaganda is simply the propagation of an idea, using various means.

Unfortunately, as with Hitler and the Nazis, propaganda has been used to propagate evil and incite violence and murder. It is a testament to the power of propaganda that the Holocaust was as widespread and supported as it was.

The Nazis understood the power of mass media, and they understood the power of symbolism and word choice. They understood that you had to dehumanize your enemy. They used words that had emotional appeal to the Germans of the day, like “freedom.”

The Nazis made radios cheaper and widely available, and then proceeded to use radio as a way to send out their propaganda within music shows. It became illegal in Nazi Germany to listen to foreign radio broadcasts, punishable by long imprisonment. So the way propaganda worked within Nazi Germany was to use all media possible and by the suppression of all opposing viewpoints.

In any case, the lesson to learn is that words are powerful. We that work in the promotion business, be it advertising, PR or marketing have the power to persuade and that is not something to be taken lightly.

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## **Gender and Message**

I am sure you have heard by now that Charlie Gibson is stepping down from the anchor position at ABC World News and

that Diane Sawyer will be taking his place come January. It was probably Charlie's time to go, he looked tired and somewhat out of touch. I am not a huge Diane Sawyer fan, although I think she will do well in the slot. However, is Diane going to be judged solely by her accomplishments? No. Absolutely not. She will be judged by her gender. It has already started. All the talk about how "historic" it is that now there will be two female evening news anchors, blah blah blah. I have news for all (mostly male) pundits and TV critics out there: It is 2009. There are women everywhere. This is not news. Katie Couric is in third place not because she is a woman, but because she has a bad delivery for news, in my opinion. Diane has much more gravitas. But it will be inevitable that they will be compared on things like appearance and clothing.

UPDATE: Carole Simpson opines that Diane Sawyer being promoted to network news is too little, too late. Simpson thinks that network news is in tremendous decline, and that with women at the helm, they may end up being blamed. Interesting take. Here's the link to her piece on CNN.

Gender is old news. For Generation Y especially (not that they watch the evening news) the idea of judging someone based on something innate like gender, race or sexual orientation is anathema. So here's a plea to all the old fogies that are stirring up flames about how amazing it is that there will be two female anchors—drop it! Concentrate on real news. Judge all anchors on their ability to deliver the news, on their editorial choices and not on the shape of their genitals.

It was Marshall McLuhan who said the medium is the message. Well, the message is the message. Here's a piece from CNN on how Obama is losing the health care fight because of social media. No, Obama is losing the health care fight because his MESSAGE is not resonating. It is not the medium, it is the message.

Thoughts?

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## **Being upfront is good policy**

As you have no doubt read somewhere else, the governor of North Carolina, Mark Sanford, had disappeared for a few days and no one seemed to know where he was. His staff first said they didn't know, and then they said he was hiking the Appalachian Trail. Well, it turns out the good governor was a lot farther away...he was in Argentina. And when he arrived back in the United States he expressed surprise about the amount of coverage.

First, let's start with the public relations aspect of this. Sanford screwed up, and not by going out of town, but by being secretive about it. He could have easily said he was taking a few vacation days and that would have been the end of the story. Instead, he chose secrecy and his staff chose disinformation or misinformation. These decisions reflect poorly on the governor's and his staff's judgements. Clearly, these poor folks don't understand how the media works. News is instantaneous and has a wide net. Everyone reported his "disappearance" and they also reported the explanation and now they are reporting (and commenting) on what really happened. Not being able to understand the consequences of your actions is the definition of lack of judgement.

When you are in a political position you are also in a public position. It is probably hard to adjust to losing your privacy but that is the what happens when you get elected to office. President Obama has made comments to this effect, about how he is living in a bubble and so forth. Nonetheless, it is best to acknowledge and deal with the situation. Not understanding

that the public is now invested in an elected official's moves is not understanding how politics works.

In any case, this case shows that a being upfront is good policy and good politics. Not talking or being secretive always carries a negative connotation. People imagine the worse and in today's hyperfast communications environment, negative comments can transverse the globe in seconds.

You can read great insight on this situation in Politico.com and on The Fix blog in the Washington Post.

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## **Going online and staying on message**

Two separate items caught my attention this morning on Yahoo! News.

First, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer may become an online-only newspaper. Its owner, Hearst, has been unable to find a buyer and had threatened to close down the paper completely. Read the story [here](#).

The second item has to do with President Obama. Apparently, he NEVER gives any speech, to large or small audiences, without using a teleprompter. According to the article (found on Yahoo! but originally from Politico.com), he wanted to wean himself off this habit during the campaign, but when he has given a speech without the help of visual aids, he has stumbled. His aides say it is especially important during this time to not mess up. I find it interesting that everyone compliments Obama's oratory, but the truth is he only gives good speeches when he can read them (they are canned). He has

shown what happens when he ad-libs: he screws up. A few weeks ago I wrote about him speaking off the cuff, and now I know he truly has a problem being casual.

So, the moral of these stories is simple. The future of print is online and it is important to stay on message.