

# POLITICO

**HISTORY DEPT.**

## **LBJ's Mad Men**

Fifty years ago today, Lyndon Johnson and a maverick Madison Avenue firm revolutionized political advertising. Campaigns have never been the same.

By ROBERT MANN | September 07, 2014



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**F**ifty years ago—on the night of Monday, Sept. 7, 1964—an innocent little girl plucking flower petals in a sun-splashed field helped usher in a revolution in American political advertising. [The 60-second television spot](#) that featured her disjointed counting exploded, literally and figuratively, all notions of what it meant to effectively persuade voters with paid political advertising.

The little girl counted as she plucked flower petals. Unseen birds chirped happily. As her counting ended, viewers suddenly heard a mission control announcer begin a

countdown. As he neared zero, the girl's image froze as the camera zoomed into her right eye until her pupil filled the screen and was replaced by a nuclear blast and mushroom cloud. As the apocalyptic scene unfolded, President Lyndon Johnson's reedy drawl entered the spot, ending with the admonition, "we must either love each other or we must die."

The so-called "Daisy Girl" spot created by Johnson's New York advertising firm aired only once as a paid commercial during the 1964 presidential campaign. An estimated 50 million voters saw it during NBC's "Monday Night at the Movies"—the film was "David and Bathsheba." Another 50 million or more saw it again, or for the first time, later that week when the three television networks aired the unique, powerful spot in their newscasts.

The spot, which was created by the ad firm Doyle Dane Bernbach ( [DDB](#)), was actually called "Peace, Little Girl," but its message was anything but peaceful. It was a fierce assault on Johnson's Republican opponent, Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona. It was as clever and creative as any attack ad ever produced in American politics. Its images were arresting and unexpected and its message—Johnson was a man of peace, Goldwater would destroy the world—was abundantly clear.

Without showing his image or even speaking his name, DDB masterfully evoked the widespread fears about a potential Goldwater presidency. The Republican candidate's remarkable absence was the essence of its brilliance, and the reason it and the other DDB spots that followed transformed political advertising: These spots had such a powerful impact not for what they said, but what did not require words at all.

For years, Goldwater had spoken recklessly about nuclear war and nuclear weaponry. He had opposed the [1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty](#). He had called the nuclear bomb "merely another weapon" in America's arsenal. When President John F. Kennedy had declared America's intent to send men to the moon, [Goldwater responded](#), "I don't want to hit the moon. I want to lob one [presumably a nuclear missile] into the men's room of the Kremlin and make sure I hit it." He favored giving NATO commanders in Western Europe authority to use tactical nuclear weapons without White House approval.

Most famously, the Arizona senator had accepted his party's nomination in San

Francisco that July, where he declared, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.” Technically, he might have been correct about relentlessly defending freedom, but his unfortunate words gave Johnson and his team further ammunition—and license—to brand their opponent a warmonger.

The Daisy Girl spot didn’t discuss Goldwater because there was no need to give viewers information they already possessed. DDB recognized that voters didn’t need much, if any, any new information about him; instead, they needed context for what they already knew. The ad firm didn’t wish to argue with voters; it hoped to seduce them. It didn’t want to sell them an idea or a fact; it wanted to leave them with an impression and evoke an emotional response. No need to say, “Barry Goldwater will blow up the world if he’s elected president.” The right images would prompt viewers to provide that message themselves. To spell out what voters already knew would have been a waste of time. Instead, the ad men who created the Daisy Girl spot wanted voters to become angry or frightened.

We remember Daisy today, but DDB’s other anti-Goldwater ads also blazed a creative trail in campaign advertising, deftly using memorable imagery and humor to create indelible images about Goldwater’s perceived recklessness or callousness.

And they hit just as hard. On the following Monday night, Sept. 14, a new DDB spot featured a different little girl, [this one](#) licking an ice cream cone as a female announcer described Goldwater’s opposition to nuclear testing and the danger to the food supply of radioactive fallout. “Now children should have lots of vitamin A and calcium,” the female announcer said, “but they shouldn’t have any strontium 90 or cesium 137.”

[Another spot](#) showed someone’s hands ripping a Social Security card in half (emphasizing Goldwater’s desire to make the program voluntary). [A hilarious spot](#) featured an unseen hand, which gradually sawed off the eastern portion of the United States, a reminder of Goldwater’s own 47 percent moment. (The previous year, Goldwater had remarked, “Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the Eastern Seaboard and let it float out to sea.”)

The genius of these spots—and their legacy—was creativity and rejection of the traditional straightforward, information-heavy approach. Most political spots of the

era were abbreviated versions of speeches—rational, unemotional, fact-based appeals. Production quality was usually poor and creativity and daring were non-existent. In the main, 30- and 60-second spots were actually rare. Until 1964, most candidates opted for 30-minute televised speeches, which preempted regular programming and sent many frustrated viewers to other networks.

In hiring DDB, Johnson's campaign was taking a calculated risk. The firm—then best known for its popular and humorous ads for the Volkswagen Beetle—had never worked on a political campaign. Inspired by the genius of the firm's creative leader, Bill Bernbach, its ad men were becoming Madison Avenue maestros in the art of selling a product as an idea. That made DDB well suited for its unusual rare foray into politics. Johnson's decision to give the firm near-absolute creative freedom to stage a different kind of advertising campaign not only helped him win a landslide over Goldwater in November, it transformed political advertising.

DDB's spots were revolutionary in many ways, but never more so than how they put the viewer to work. Until then, viewers of campaign ads were mostly passive recipients of dry information. Vivid imagery, subtle humor and implicit (instead of explicit) appeals—innovations we now take for granted in political ads—were virtually unheard of until 1964.

Just as significant as the pioneering way DDB delivered its messages was the startling production quality of the spots. Although black and white, they almost sparkled in comparison to everything that had come before.

Visit the website “[The Living Room Candidate](#),” where reside many of the TV spots from each presidential campaign since 1952. View the spots from [1956](#) and [1960](#) and then watch Johnson's spots in [1964](#). What you'll see is a stunning, quantum leap in creativity and style. (Goldwater's spots from [1964](#), on the other hand, were similar in their drabness to those from [1952](#).)

The proof of the Daisy Girl spot's genius? By the 1968 campaign, everything had changed. Both major campaigns had fully embraced the idea that emotion played an enormous role in persuading voters. The idea of using creative advertising principles was fully accepted by candidates. Fear was a potent force in political advertising.

Narrative as a persuasive tool was firmly embedded in political ads.

Fifty years later, the DNA of Daisy Girl remains in our political advertising.

Consider Ronald Reagan's "Bear" spot from 1984, a classic of story and parable in advertising. It demonstrated—like Daisy Girl—how the existing negatives in the viewers' minds (in this case notions about the Democrats' unwillingness to confront the Soviets) made it unnecessary to supply much information.

Four years later, in 1988, the devastating [Willie Horton spot](#) demonstrated how an existing storyline about a candidate could be put to destructive use. George W. Bush's brilliant "[Wolves](#)" spot in 2004—a not-so-subtle homage to Reagan's "Bear" ad—relied, like Daisy Girl, on information and experience already in viewers' minds.

Voters say they dislike this kind of negative campaigning. But their behavior tells a different story. Successful political advertisers will not soon, if ever, take us back to the pre-Daisy Girl days of purely bland, uncreative, fact-based arguments. If the best political ads still win elections—and there is considerable debate about whether they do—it's the emotional appeals and striking visuals that attract viewers and move them to action. That was the true innovation of the Daisy spot—eschewing argument for emotion and understanding that voting is often not a rational decision, but rather a psychological purchase.

There will, of course, be other innovations in political TV advertising. Targeting spots to individual voters is one that will soon transform the field, just as Daisy did 50 years ago. One consequence of this narrow casting may be that individual ads, like Daisy, will never again be communal events. My political world may be vastly different from my neighbor's.

Yet, even with this and other innovations, emotional appeals in political campaigns are here to stay. The Daisy spot taught us that it's often easier to provoke voters than to educate them. Emotion, especially fear, as force in politics won't soon disappear from our television sets and computer screens.

That is our reality of our political world—and it was born, violently, on that September night in 1964.

