



Teaching Critical Thinking by Asking: “Could Lincoln Be Elected Today?”

With Northern victories in the Civil War proving elusive, on August 23, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln penned a memorandum that he asked his cabinet to endorse sight unseen. It read:

[I]t seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re- elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect [General George McClellan], as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards.¹

Two years earlier Lincoln had removed the man who was now his opponent from command of the Army of the Potomac. McClellan was an indecisive general who saw himself as America’s Napoleon.² A majority of those who served under him in the army voted against him in 1864.³

Teaching Patterns of Deception

The Annenberg Public Policy Center’s political literacy project called FlackCheck developed [Patterns of Deception](#) that range from the causal fallacy “after this, therefore, because of this” (post hoc ergo propter hoc) to conspiracy theorizing. Other categories include deceptive framing, applying a double standard, making a glass house attack, and such means of visual manipulation as visual vilification, seeing what’s not heard, and deceptive dramatization. Videos on the web page [“Could Lincoln Be Re-elected Today?”](#) and [attacks ads](#) in FlackCheck’s

hypothetical version of the 1864 presidential contest between Lincoln and McClellan were created to help classes recognize flaws in arguments in general and political ads in particular and to examine the criteria for evaluating candidates, past and present, for the presidency.⁴

Class Exercise: Recognizing 'Words Taken out of Context' and 'Guilt by Association'

Because in his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln said, "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain," and "...that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," it is accurate to report that he spoke the words "perish from the earth" and "died in vain." But if his 1864 opponent, General George McClellan, had had the assistance of today's wiliest campaign consultants, the public might have remembered something very different.

After students have compared the text of the Gettysburg Address to the ad titled "[Honestly Abe,](#)" the class might ask, what are the devices the ad uses to distract us from the context in which the quoted words were uttered? And why, even if they are unfamiliar with Lincoln's most famous speech, should viewers suspect that a commander-in-chief probably would not attack the legitimacy of a war he was prosecuting, suggest that the deaths of both Union and Confederate soldiers interred in the ground he was dedicating were pointless, and predict the demise of the nation? The lesson? When common sense tells you a leader is unlikely to have said what you heard him or her say in an ad, investigate the possibility that the words are out of context. Now turn to the "[Could Lincoln Be Re-elected Today?](#)" page on AnnenbergClassroom.org to see an example in which the words of then-Vice President Joe Biden are taken out of context.

After reviewing contemporary example, can the class now detect the techniques associated with out of context statements? With a copy of Lincoln's First Inaugural address accessible, ask whether an attack in the ad titled "[Believe in the Union](#)" is faithful to that important document's meaning and (finding that it is not) ask how comparable its "out of context" moves are to those in the other reviewed ads.

Follow the same teaching strategy to explore a second deceptive tactic, guilt by association, in the ad attack on the supposed Confederate sympathies of Mary Todd Lincoln titled "[The Truth About Mary Todd Lincoln.](#)" This time, instead of fidelity to texts, the task is ascertaining fidelity to facts. Using the resources at such sites as the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum⁴, determine whether three of Mrs. Lincoln's brothers fought for the Confederacy, whether she housed a rebel's wife in the White House, and whether she was indeed a daughter of Dixie. And if these statements prove accurate, ask whether they justify the ad's inference that the man behind Mrs. Lincoln is Jefferson Davis?

Teaching 'What Constitutes a Legitimate and Fair Attack?'

In addition to illustrating patterns of deception, the anti-Lincoln videos are designed to provoke

class discussion about the criteria that we ought to employ in assessing the qualifications of a person seeking the presidency, the relationship between campaigning and governance, and the arguments for and against significant pieces of legislation signed into law by Abraham Lincoln during his first term.

Class Exercises and Questions for Discussion

Attacks on Legislation Lincoln Signed

Historians regard Lincoln's support for the transcontinental railroad, the Morrill (land-grant college) Act, and the Homestead Act as singular accomplishments. Does the class agree? If so, how did each law contribute to the well-being of the country? If not, what were the harmful effects? How accurately did the debate at the time forecast the effects of each? How do the ads attacking these pieces of legislation play on fear of the unknown, fear of change, and stereotypes? Were any of the fears expressed in these attack ads justified? If not, what lessons can we draw?

- [“Repeal the Land-Grant College Act”](#)
- [“Train to Nowhere”](#)
- [“Lincoln’s Homestead Act: A Redistribution of America’s Wealth”](#)

Attacks on Lincoln for the Cost and Casualties of the Civil War

The next set of videos invite a focus on questions such as: To what extent, if at all, should a president be blamed for the deaths and injuries occasioned by war? How does a country pay for the financial costs of war? Is it fair to indict the president for supporting a tax increase to support a war he champions? How fair are the inferences in the attack ads titled [“Mr. Lincoln’s War on Men,”](#) [“Lincoln, a Tax and Spend Socialist,”](#) [“A War We Can’t Afford,”](#) and [“Four More Years?”](#)?

Attacks Based in Biography

Because the public has had the chance to see how he conducts himself in office and to learn his legislative priorities, voters generally consider what a president did before assuming office unhelpful in determining whether he deserves reelection. Nonetheless the FlackCheck attack campaign has mined Lincoln's distant past to resurrect statements made by or about his religious preferences ([“Atheist Abe”](#)) and his mental health ([“Can We Trust a Melancholiac with a Second Term?”](#)). A video filled with deceptive images but accurate words ([“Rail Splitter”](#)) questions Abe's alleged wealth. A spot that morphs his image into that of Benedict Arnold challenges the wisdom of his opposition to the Mexican War ([“Lincoln the Traitor”](#)). As a prelude to asking [“Whose Emancipation is he Going to Support Next?”](#) another assault reminds voters that as a young lawyer, Lincoln defended an admitted adulteress, as well as a woman who smashed up a saloon, and a wife who allegedly poisoned her husband. And the McClellan campaign has actually located a person ready to argue that Honest Abe isn't honest after all ([“What are Lincoln’s Core Values?”](#)).

Possible discussion questions include: Had they been launched against him in 1860, would any of these attacks accurately forecast his conduct in office? Under what circumstances, if any, would a voter find these attacks helpful in distinguishing between candidates seeking the presidency? What form do these attacks take in today's campaigns?

Attacks on Controversial Actions and Seeming Inconsistencies

Which behaviors matter in judging the competence of a president and which don't? Would you worry if you knew that a president participated in séances in the White House (["The Ouija Board President?"](#)) or that his wife bought fancy clothes in the middle of a war (["Mrs. Lincoln: Is This What We're Fighting For?"](#))? Does Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus justify a vote against him (["Unconstitutional Abe"](#))? What about his appointment of a general so fond of the bottle that the newspapers said, "The army is being ruined under the leadership of a drunkard whose confidential adviser was a lunatic" (["Lincoln the Traitor"](#))?

Raising Larger Questions about How We Should Assess a Candidate for President

The FlackCheck attack videos also invite the question, under what circumstances should a president deviate from positions announced in his election campaign? After viewing the ads titled ["The Flip Flop President"](#) and ["Two-Face Abe Lincoln,"](#) the class might ask, do these attacks identify actual changes in position? If so, how did Lincoln explain the change? Should these alterations justify a vote for or against Lincoln in 1864? Or shouldn't they weigh in a voter's decision at all?

How Lincoln Will Win Our Hypothetical 1864 Campaign

To win our hypothetical 2012 version of the 1864 match-up, the McClellan team has attempted to cast the election as a referendum on Lincoln, not a choice between the two. The resulting relentless attack campaign against Lincoln invites the public to oust Lincoln without considering what kind of president would be elected as a result.

Where FlackCheck's McClellan campaign deploys deception and distraction to turn Lincoln's strengths into liabilities, the Lincoln response demonstrates that it is possible to win by campaigning factually, fairly, and honorably. In ads scripted by Bob Shrum, who created the ads for the Kerry presidential campaign in 2004, and Mark McKinnon, who did the same for the reelection run of incumbent Republican George W. Bush, the Lincoln campaign quotes McClellan's own in-context words against him, catalogues his failures as a leader in careful detail and makes the case that Lincoln does indeed deserve four more years.

We hope that these Lincoln ads will remind students that the country has survived difficult times in the past and show that winning honorably is the better way. If those who seek our votes mislead, the best protection for the country is a citizenry armed with the tools to detect patterns of deception, sort significant issues from silly distractions, and apply sound criteria to

determine which candidate is better qualified to lead.

National Standards

This lesson promotes one of the literacy skills presented in the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*: Evaluate sources for validity and credibility and to detect bias, propaganda, and censorship.

It also addresses the following content standard for grades 9–12 of the National Standards for Civics and Government: Evaluate historical and contemporary political communication using such criteria as logical validity, factual accuracy, emotional appeal, distorted evidence, appeals to bias or prejudice.

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Notes

1. Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 514.
2. Bruce Catton, *The Army of the Potomac: Mr. Lincoln's Army* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), 53, 58.
3. Margaret E. Wagner, *The Library of Congress Illustrated Timeline of the Civil War* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2011), 209.
4. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, www.alplm.org.

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