

Buttons to Bumper Stickers: Political Campaign Memorabilia

Campaign memorabilia can help students connect past with present — Lee Ann Potter

DURING THE SEASON of political campaigns, scores of bumper stickers, posters, and other items with slogans supporting one candidate or another suddenly appear and quickly multiply around neighborhoods and towns, with stickers plastered on cars, and posters hanging in windows, or posted in front yards. From George Washington to George W. Bush, politicians have used such memorabilia to capture the attention of voters for centuries.

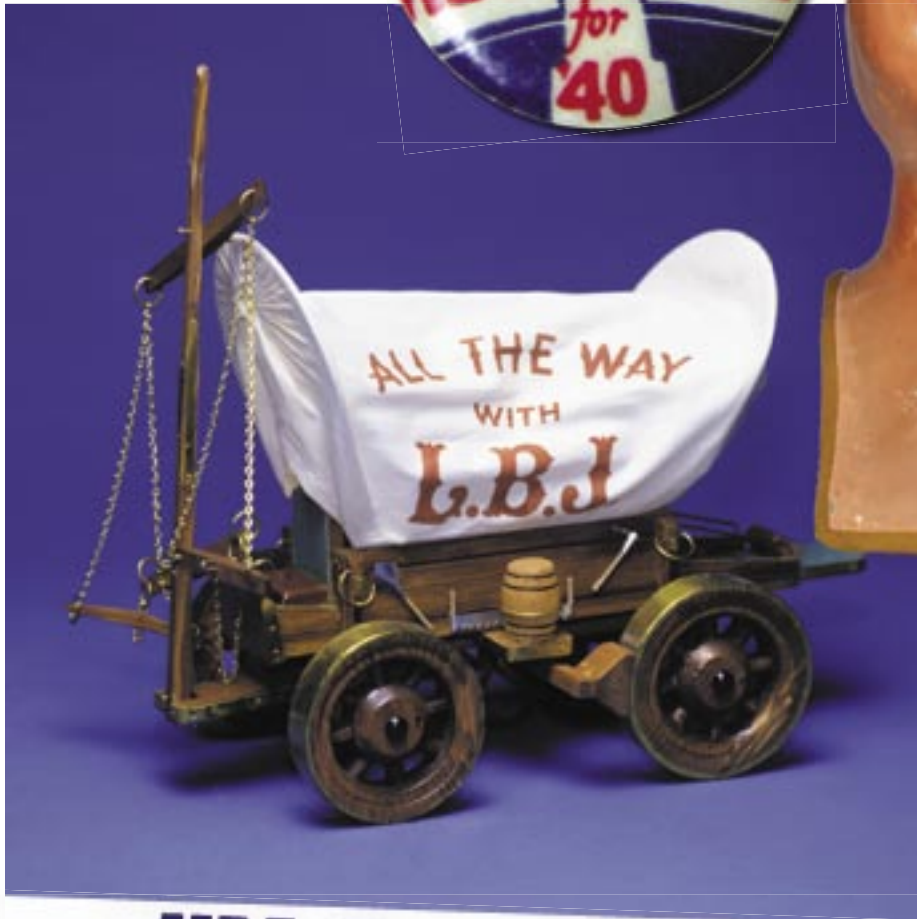
Today, many of these political campaign memorabilia—including the items featured in this issue—are housed in the presidential libraries among millions of documents, photographs, audiovisual materials, and other historical items. Bumper stickers, buttons, and posters dominate the collection, but sunglasses, suspenders, ties, hats, and other curious items serve as reminders of political campaigns from as far back as the 1920s.

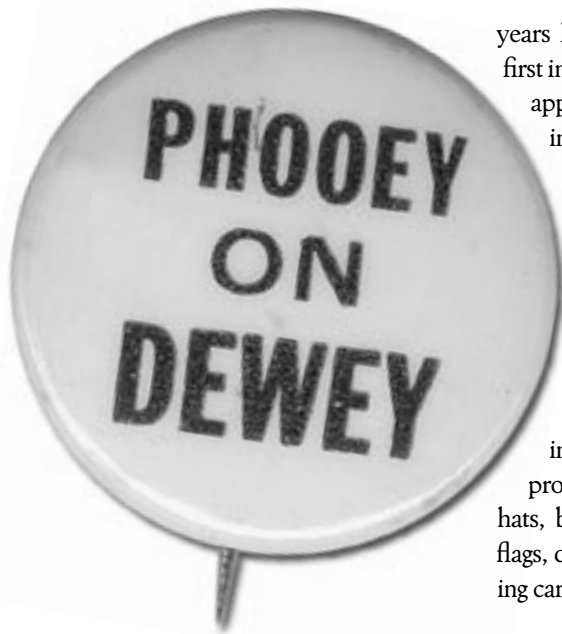
Of course, campaign memorabilia existed long before the 1920s. In fact, George Washington and many who were present at his first inauguration in 1789 wore brass clothing buttons that read “G.W.-Long live the President.” For the next fifty years, political memorabilia consisted primarily of such buttons and silk ribbons.

Other items began to appear on a wide scale in the 1840 campaign. William Henry Harrison’s supporters produced and used hundreds of items in the design of a log cabin. (Though Harrison was born on a Virginia plantation, the son of one of the Declaration of Independence signers, he tried to tie his image with the humble life associated with the log cabin.) Twenty









years later, the 1860 campaign was the first in which the candidates' own images appeared on promotional items. And in 1896, the political button that is so familiar today was patented by a manufacturing company and widely used by both William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan.

Today, the production of campaign memorabilia has gone far beyond the original brass clothing buttons and silk ribbons and has progressed to include tee-shirts, knit hats, ball caps, jackets, drink ware, car flags, dog tags, key chains, golf balls, playing cards and much, much more.

Teaching Activities

1. Provide students with examples of political campaign memorabilia featured in this issue and lead a class discussion using the following questions.

- Who created this material?
- For what purpose?
- When was it created? How do you know?
- Do any of the items contain slogans? Is their meaning clear?
- Why do you think certain formats, colors, or designs were chosen?

2. Encourage students to create their own campaign item promoting one of this year's candidates. Ask volunteers to share their item with the class and to explain their





design choices (i.e., why did they choose a certain color or format?).

3. Share information from the background essay with students about the history of campaign memorabilia. Remind them that campaign memorabilia is just one method used by candidates to promote themselves and their campaigns; speeches, television and radio advertisements, and other methods are also used. Ask students to brainstorm other methods and to write a one-page essay identifying which method they think is most effective.

4. Divide students into groups of three and ask them to pretend that they are the campaign managers for a political candidate (local, state, or national). Tell them that they have a fixed budget (you can determine the amount) and that it is up to them to determine how the money will be spent to get their candidate elected. Encourage them to conduct research into actual costs. For example, ask them to find



out how much it would cost for the production of a television commercial as well as the cost of airtime. Ask them to develop an annotated spreadsheet detailing their budget plan. As an extension activity, invite a campaign manager to come and talk with your students about his or her job and how he or she makes budgetary decisions.

5. Inform students that the Annenberg Public Policy Center at The University of Pennsylvania is one organization that gathers information from voters about their impressions and knowledge of candidates. Direct your students to the National Annenberg Election Survey questions and data that are available online at www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/index.htm. Suggest that students conduct a similar survey of other students, parents, and

members of their communities and compare the local data with the national data. Ask them to consider the impact various campaign methods have on survey data.

6. Divide students into pairs, photocopy the various campaign items from this issue, and provide one to each pair. Direct students to conduct research on the campaign represented by their items. Ask them to find out who the principal candidates in the election were, what the major issues were, and the outcomes. The websites of the various Presidential Libraries may provide valuable information: www.archives.gov/presidential_libraries/.

Note

All of the political memorabilia featured in this issue come from the holdings of the presidential libraries that are part of the National Archives and Records Administration. Additional information about the libraries, their museums, and their programs for educators and students is available online at www.archives.gov/presidential_libraries/index.html

LEE ANN POTTER is the head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor for "Teaching With Documents," a regular department of SOCIAL EDUCATION. She would like to extend special thanks to the education specialists in the Presidential Libraries for assistance with gathering images of campaign memorabilia for this article. You may reproduce the campaign items shown here in any quantity.



I BACK JACK

