

WONK A MILE IN MY SHOES: AN EXAMINATION OF  
AL GORE'S NARRATIVE OF EXPERTISE IN THE  
2000 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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This thesis is dedicated to Howard and Marilyn Balanoff, who I dearly love.

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## CHAPTER I

### ALL ELECTIONS ARE ABOUT THE FUTURE?

#### Overview

On September 28, 2000, then Democratic Presidential nominee and vice president, Al Gore, sat to answer questions from CNN talk-show host Larry King. The commentator asked the vice president if he exaggerates. Gore responded, “If you get a fact wrong, all of the sudden, you are accused of committing some horrible offence” (“Vice President”). When posed with a similar question, “why seemingly innocent misstatements by the vice president come off as evidence that he is not fit to serve in the office of president of the United States,” professional political pundits expressed the same befuddlement evident in Gore’s response. Newsweek’s Jonathan Alter reported, “If these slips had been made by any other politician, they would have barely caused a peep.” Charlie Peters of Washington Monthly complained: “criticisms of George Bush’s misrepresentations, as opposed to Al Gore’s, have been in a notably sotto voce” (qtd. in Kurtz, “Pundits”).

Certainly Al Gore was not the first politician to ever tell a lie, fudge an anecdote or exaggerate his personal involvement in important events. For instance, Ronald Reagan, long regarded as “the great communicator” frequently mixed fact with fiction (Cohen A25). Richard Cohen, political columnist for the Washington Post, highlighted

the difference in perceptions between the Teflon president, Ronald Reagan and the Velcro candidate, Al Gore: “Gore’s overriding and maybe insurmountable handicap is that he is no Reagan—he lacks the man’s charm. Where Reagan could dismiss his critics with a wave of his hand and some disarming joke, Gore just digs in more, tries harder and smiles like the groom at a shotgun wedding” (A25). This study does not take issue with Reagan’s charm, but suggests that it is something else besides a lack of personal charm that plagued the vice president. This thesis examines the campaign from the narrative perspective to demonstrate how presidential candidate Al Gore defined his relationship to voters and the office of president through narratives that presented his character as an “expert,” a role much different from Reagan’s mythic western hero.

The concept of the candidates’ character played a prominent role in campaign 2000. As the following comments made in the National Review one month before the election indicated, the country was primed to chose a president based on the types of personal values the candidate represented:

The American people will pick a president this year based on their gut, not their mind—they simply don’t feel that their interests are at stake. After eight years of Bill Clinton they are picking a candidate less like they might pick a leader, and more like they would pick a husband. They aren’t looking for the candidate with the best programs or the best ideas, they are looking for someone who won’t embarrass them. (qtd. in Kurtz, “Media Outlets”)

What the Review alluded to is the substance of this thesis. The 2000 presidential election was framed in the minds of the American public as a contest of character where

traditional, rational logic did not apply. In this election, voters utilized what this thesis will define as narrative logic to understand the events of the campaign as a choice between values represented in the stories that the campaigns told. In Walter Fisher's words, the public evaluated each candidate's communication "as stories rather than as an 'argument' in the traditional sense" (Communication 144). This thesis will argue that the application of the narrative perspective to the campaign explains why commentary criticizing Gore's alleged exaggerations and his factual inaccuracies resonated with voters by identifying how stories presenting Al Gore's character as an "expert," as well as his lack of proficiency as a narrator, failed to overcome competing stories promoted by his opponent, Texas Governor George W. Bush.

This study identifies and describes the narratives that dominated the 2000 presidential campaign and how those narratives affected the public's perception of the candidates. Concentrating on the development of Al Gore's narrative of expertise, this thesis will demonstrate that the stories Al Gore presented in the campaign for the purpose of defining his character and the anecdotes that he used to humanize his public policy proposals interfered with each other and left the vice president open to criticisms of inconsistency. Because of this deficiency, Al Gore's ability to serve as narrator of his own story suffered. The contradiction between Gore's character as expert and his factual misstatements further bolstered the probability and fidelity of the competing Bush narrative which presented the vice president as lacking the credibility to hold the office of President of the United States. The time frame of this study extends from the completion of the party primaries in May of 2000 until the election of November 7, 2000. The discourse examined in this thesis covers a broad range of rhetorical communications



during the campaign including campaign trail speeches Al Gore made to audiences in Michigan, Illinois, and Georgia; each candidate's acceptance speech at the party conventions; the transcripts of the debates between Al Gore and George W. Bush; and oppositional ads run by the Gore and Bush campaigns. In analyzing these rhetorical messages, this study will also explore the important implications that narratives involving "expertise" have in the campaign context.

### Significance

The presidential election of 2000 presents an excellent new case study for narrative logic. Previously, scholars such as Walter Fisher and William Lewis have used narrative logic to explain how Ronald Reagan enjoyed unprecedented popularity despite criticisms of his policies. Although both of these analyses will be studied in much detail later in this thesis, it is relevant to note their conclusions. Reagan's character is central to Fisher's analysis. In fact, it can be identified as one of the major discriminating factors between narrative and technical logic. Because technical, rational logic neglects the ability to consider character in evaluation, Fisher concludes that it is an inadequate paradigm for examining reasoning regarding values. He notes: "When one has determined that a person—ordinary or presidential—has a trustworthy and reliable character, that his or her heart is in the right place, one is willing to overlook or forgive many things" (Communication 147-48). In addition to determining that a narrative has characterological coherence, stories must also possess narrative probability and fidelity. These criteria will be substantively explained in chapter two of this thesis, but suffice it to say that narrative probability refers to a story's coherence and fidelity represents a story's

truthfulness and reliability (Fisher, Communication 47). When evaluating Reagan's rhetoric, Fisher concludes that "Reagan's appeal derives not only from his superior performance, but also, and most important here, from the consistency of his story with the story of America, from the coherence of his character" (Communication 156).

Lewis explains the gulf between Reagan's personal approval ratings and the lack of technical approval regarding his policy initiatives by demonstrating that those who would use technical logic or the rational world paradigm find that Reagan's rhetoric is "simplistic, untrue, or irrational and lament the lack of public response to his patent deficiencies" (281). In contrast, evaluating Reagan based on his ability as a storyteller evokes a much different response placing "emphasis on his character and praise for providing vision, reassurance, and inspiration to the American public" (281).

These two studies from the mid-1980's establish a firm precedent for the current undertaking. The Reagan comparison is particularly illuminating. Al Gore, in some senses, can be called the anti-Reagan. As will be demonstrated later, the vice president was by most accounts a master of the issues, "technically" speaking. However, Gore's inability to create a consistent narrative relationship between his character as a master of the issues and his misstatements of fact account for his failure as a storyteller. In much the same way that Fisher and Lewis demonstrate the success of a master political storyteller such as Reagan, this analysis is unique and significant because it sheds light on the political implications of a narrative that fails to evoke a sense of probability and fidelity in the public.

Al Gore's ability to create a compelling narrative also may have been further hindered by his performance as a narrator. Mary E. Stuckey in her analysis of the

narrative styles of former presidents argues that all presidents use storytelling in their public communication (45). Stuckey separates the ways in which presidents use storytelling into two categories: narrational and dialogic. She identifies presidents such as Ronald Reagan as exemplar of the narrational style. According to Stuckey, rhetors such as Reagan “encourage presidential interpretive dominance by assuming the role of storyteller and asserting control over the administration and the media” (46). These narrational presidents present a vision or theme that is all encompassing. It is this broad theme that gives the narrative its power (Stuckey 46). Other presidents, such as Jimmy Carter, adopt a more dialogic approach. These presidents “primarily focus on specific issues rather than relating those topics to a generalized theme” (Stuckey 49). Stuckey adds, “Because they minimize the performance of this communicative task, these presidents also minimize the interpretive dominance of the presidency as an institution as well as their own dominance as president” (49). She concludes that, for modern presidents, the narrational approach has been more successful. This thesis presents the opportunity to apply Stuckey’s categories to a campaign context and determine the importance of a candidate’s performance as a narrator when struggling to gain interpretive dominance.

Other scholars who have dealt with narratives in a political context include Bruce Gronbeck, whose article on negative narratives in presidential campaign ads describes the “narrativization” of political campaigning. Gronbeck explores the power of narratives invoked in political ads when the subject matter is morality. He wrote that a:

perception of the sequence of actions are given a kind of coherence and point by narrative form. Actions are related to each other, they cohere,

through narrative structuration and are made to point to a moral conclusion by the narrator's deliberate inscription of a particular interpretation of why we are seeing what we see. Moreover, the very act of telling is an explanation of what this campaign is about—what this year's political agenda ought to be. (343)

Gronbeck's study is of particular interest to the examination of the oppositional ads produced by the Bush campaign. The most successful Bush ads dealt with narrative themes questioning the character of Al Gore and relating his current behavior to past actions in the previous administration. Furthermore, Gronbeck's work demonstrates that the power of narrative form to structure past events provided the public with predictive power regarding a candidate's future actions. As this thesis will demonstrate, the oppositional ads produced by the Bush campaign and the Republican National Committee as well as Bush's performance in the debates reinforced the theme that the election was a contest of character and that voters had a moral obligation to act to restore credibility to the White House.

Both Gronbeck and Sanford Schram warn of the potential danger that exists from those who would exploit the narrative form. Schram agrees that political actors use stories as their scripts for engaging in political performance (6). He cautions that "since it is always the case that more than one story can be told to make sense of any particular areas of concern or issue, stories are necessarily not innocuous and disinterested but instead can be potentially dangerous and interested" (6). W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman echo Schram's concerns. They argue that "the awareness that the very acceptance of a narrative involves a rejection of others makes the issue politically and

personally vital” (160). W. Lance Haynes believes that identifying and unearthing narratives is the primary task of the rhetorical critic. He holds that “by questioning the narrative’s inside world, the likelihood of its event and pace, the reasonableness of its arguments, the critic further enables the audience to judge a discourse’s probability” (116-17). These conclusions lend further importance to the continued evaluation of political narratives.

The final argument demonstrating the significance of applying the narrative perspective to evaluate the rhetoric of the 2000 campaign is that all areas of the election—media coverage, candidate communications, political ads, the debates—focused on a single story line to interpret the events. Eric Alterman describes that story line for both candidates. He writes:

For Bush, the unstated question from the beginning has been, “Is he too stupid to be president?” For Al Gore, it’s “Is he too dishonest?” . . .  
Virtually nothing else, including the fact that the two men represent wholly different constituencies, differing philosophies of governance, and differing futures for the country, has been considered relevant.

Marjorie Randon Hershey confirmed Alterman’s findings. After conducting a content analysis of the media coverage of the election, she concluded that Gore’s media coverage was dominated by a “personality frame” (68). Even the well-respected moderator for the debates, Jim Lehrer, immediately invoked the campaign narratives in his questioning of the candidates. The first two questions Lehrer asked the participants concerned Bush’s intellectual capacity and Gore’s leadership ability. During the campaign, audience perception of the candidates also reflected this frame. Election Day exit polls revealed

that “those who thought honesty and leadership were the most important qualities for a president chose Bush. And those who thought experience and knowledge more important went for Gore” (“Exit Polls”). Given the intrinsic nature of these narratives to the election, it is crucial to examine them further.

As previously mentioned, stories gain much of their meaning from the ability to structure understanding of past events and, based on those events, predict future behavior. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the historical context of the election, specifically, how the actions of the Clinton administration and the early Gore campaign impacted the dominating narratives of the 2000 election is examined.

### Historical Perspective

One of Bill Clinton’s favorite sayings was that all political contests were about the future. However, the defeat of Al Gore may have had a lot to do with the past. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2000, the night before Vice President Al Gore would step to the podium at the Democratic National Convention and accept his party’s nomination for president, Bob Herbert of the New York Times described the current state of the nation. He wrote: “nearly everything is going the vice president’s way. The U.S. is enjoying the best economy in its history. The country is at peace. Crime and unemployment are way down, as are the welfare roles and the rates of teen pregnancy. The stock market has soared and so has home ownership. Never before has the American dream been a reality for so many” (A29). The Chicago Sun Times reported a Gallup poll finding that six out of ten Americans believed the country is on the right track (Neal, "Stiff Opponent" A29).

Political scientist Andrew Busch of the World & I wrote: “The United States is in the midst of the longest economic expansion in its history. The world is essentially at peace. Even some key social indicators, like crime and teenage pregnancy, have declined” (22). Traditionally, these factors have strongly favored incumbent administrations (Hershey 50). Six political scientists retained by the Washington Post using political and economic models predicted that Gore should win the election based on the current state of the economy and policy approval ratings of the incumbent president (Cook P1). Charlie Cook concluded:

The economy continues to run like a top, with no sign that the good times are coming to an end. Therefore, voters should be in the mood to ‘stay the course,’ as Ronald Regan’s ad-makers liked to say. By any objective measure, people should be inclined to keep the Clinton/Gore team in place. (P1)

However, voters were not primed to view this election from such an “objective” standpoint; they were encouraged to view the contest as a referendum on moral character. In fact, by the time Vice President Gore and the Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush met in the first presidential debate, few people pointed to the rosy economy brought about by the current administration as the dominating issue surrounding the campaign. There was evidence that the legacy President Clinton left to his would-be successor was of a much different nature.

The flip side of President Clinton’s legacy was a dark cloud hanging over his second in command. This dark cloud had a name- “Clinton Fatigue.” Since President Clinton’s reelection in 1996, the country watched scandal after scandal invade the inner

sanctum of the White House. From the continuing “Whitewater” scandal to the Supreme Court decision to allow the president to be deposed in the Paula Jones sexual harassment lawsuit while in office, to questionable fundraising practices, Clinton’s second term was fraught with legal wrangling. Most notoriously, the president was involved in an adulterous affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Special prosecutor Kenneth Starr accused the president of lying to cover up the affair and attempting to influence others to lie on his behalf. He believed that the president purposefully misled the American public and continued to hide behind precise legal terminology in order to avoid admitting the truth. The Lewinsky scandal reached a boiling point in the United States Senate when 13 House managers, based on Starr’s allegations, tried the president hoping to remove him from office. This placed the entire administration, including the vice president, in a difficult position. As Bob Edwards of NPR recounted, “For 13 months, the president’s supporters took to the airwaves to argue that perjury to cover up adulterous sex in the Oval Office was not an impeachable offense. They won, but at a price” (“Exit Polls”). For Al Gore, the price of supporting the president during this time may have been costly. After the Senate refused to convict President Clinton, the vice president stood on the White House lawn and lauded their decision. He proclaimed that Bill Clinton would be considered, “One of our greatest presidents” (qtd. in “Caught”). Whether or not that statement was true is yet to be determined. What was clear is that the vice president’s predication provided the Republican opposition with ammunition for their effort to inextricably link the two politicians. As Republican vice presidential nominee, Dick Cheney said, “Mr. Gore will try to separate himself from his leader’s



shadow, but somehow we will never see one without thinking of the other” (qtd. in Pooley, “Grudge Match” 26).

The impeachment of President Clinton also had a profound effect on the American public. Susan Page of USA Today argued that the fallout from the Clinton administration was an American electorate weary from scandal (A4). The incumbent Democratic president, Bill Clinton, helped the country achieve unprecedented economic prosperity, but left voters feeling that the administration had been tainted by scandal and deceit (Hershey 50). Columnist Kevin Phillips went as far as comparing the effect of the Lewinsky scandal on the American public to the Watergate scandal decades earlier. He described both the Carter/Ford and the Gore/Bush elections as “scandal warped” (“Effects”). In Phillip’s view, issues regarding Clinton’s lack of personal integrity were potentially damaging to Gore because, by association, the vice president could be perceived as symbolic of an administration lacking personal morality.

A survey taken by Democratic pollster Celinda Lake and Republican polltaker Ed Goas illustrated how potentially damaging the baggage from the Clinton association was to Gore. The study found:

President Clinton’s job approval ratings at 58 percent and his disapproval rating at 38 percent. When asked to rate him as a person, however, only 29 percent of those polled approved of him, while 62 percent disapproved. Those strongly disapproving Clinton outnumbered those strongly approving by almost 4-to-1, 45 percent to 12 percent. (qtd. in Cook P1)

These numbers represented the falling off in personal approval ratings for President Clinton. The majority of the public, while supporting Clinton’s job performance and the

economy, disapproved of his private behavior. This sentiment was particularly strong regarding the president's conduct associated with White House intern Monica Lewinsky (Hershey 50). For the vice president's opponent, the public's negative association with the moral character of the Clinton administration represented a key advantage. Throughout the campaign, George W. Bush tirelessly tried to tie Gore to this negative sentiment.

The Bush campaign's ability to bind Gore to the personal failings of Bill Clinton was enhanced by the behavior of the vice president. Gore, while a devout family man, had been tainted by involvement in other high-profile scandals. Several of these events were directly related to Al Gore's service as the vice president, and the Republicans contextualized the other events, even though they occurred outside the duties of the administration, as emblematic of the "Clinton/Gore" regime.

In September of 2000, questions surrounding fundraising efforts from the 1996 campaign resurfaced. In order to raise funds for Clinton's re-election in 1996, the Democratic National Committee held what were described as "donor maintenance events" inside the White House. Critics argued that the administration was essentially selling access to the president, vice president, and first lady (Saunders 197). These donor maintenance events included the now-infamous overnight stays for major donors in the White House's Lincoln bedroom. Gore's alleged practice of using his White House office phone to pressure corporate donors into making big-time contributions came to be known as "phone-gate" (Saunders 200). When reporters began asking questions such as "Did the vice president know that phone calls made from his office were to raise "hard money" benefiting his own campaign?" or "Did he think that the calls were to raise so-

called “soft-money?” Gore maintained that there was nothing illegal or unethical about the donor calls. But the press continued to call for the vice president to explain his actions. In an article he wrote for the Washington Post, Bob Woodward reported that the vice president was known informally at the Democratic National Committee as the “solicitor-in-chief” (Saunders 200).

To respond to this type of criticism, the vice president conducted a disastrous press conference. He hoped to maintain that there was nothing illegal or unethical about the calls. However, in a twenty-minute press conference, he repeated the phrase “there was no controlling legal authority” over the calls seven times (“Ethical Questions” 18A). Instead of straightforwardly admitting that the calls, while not illegal, had been inappropriate, Gore attempted to justify them by exploiting a loophole in the law. Saunders described the rhetoric as suggesting “the problem wasn’t that people in the White House broke the law, but rather that the laws allowed them to do such things” (198). When later repeated by the Bush campaign during the 2000 election, Gore’s response to the calls, couched in precise legal terminology, sounded eerily like President Clinton’s response to the Lewinsky matter.

The reemergence of another old scandal in June of 2000 brought back words into the public lexicon that the public might have preferred to forget: “special prosecutor.” And this time, the words that had become so closely allied with President Clinton, Kenneth Starr, and Monica Lewinsky, were attached to the presidential nominee, Al Gore. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, the Washington Post reported that the vice president’s 1996 visit to the Hsi Lai Buddhist temple in Hacienda, California, provoked a top Justice Department official to conclude that a special prosecutor was needed to determine if Gore lied to

investigators about the nature of his visit (Harris and Connolly A1). Long-time Democratic fundraisers Maria Hsia and John Huang arranged the vice president's visit to the temple. During the visit, Gore ate lunch with the temple's Venerable Master and greeted others. The controversy arose when event organizers Hsia and Huang were accused of laundering donations through the temple's nuns. Both Hsia and Huang were accused of coercing the nuns into writing checks to the Democratic National Committee, then reimbursing them for the contributions. The event was further complicated by the fact that conducting a political fundraiser at a temple was against the law. The conditions granting the temple non-profit status prohibited it from engaging in political activity. Gore responded at the time by claiming that he did not know that the event was a fundraiser. When questions about the visit resurfaced in the 2000 campaign, Post reporters found the vice president's response unfortunately reminiscent of earlier responses. They wrote: "If the controversy is a relic from the Clinton-Gore attic, so too is yesterday's response. Challenge the source and the timing of the controversy as partisan and illegitimate" (Harris and Connolly A1). Harris and Connolly believed that by emphasizing the partisan nature of the controversy, Gore evoked the memory of the Clinton administration claim that the special prosecutor's actions were part of a vast right wing conspiracy. Eventually, Janet Reno declined to appoint a prosecutor to the case, but the damage was done. Continued weariness of scandal reinforced the public sense of "Clinton Fatigue." This sentiment was echoed in the press. Bob Herbert suggested, "after Bill Clinton, they [the American public] need a president that they know is being straight with them" (A29). John Harris and Ceci Connolly of the Washington Post captured the feeling of the all-important swing vote: "independent voters believe that the Clinton

administration has set a low ethical tone” (A1). Involvement in the fundraising scandals in the White House and at the Buddhist temple in California made it easier for the public and Gore’s opponent to associate the vice president with the “low ethical tone” of the Clinton administration.

While on the campaign trail, Vice President Gore also made several high-profile gaffes that his opponent charged shared the same “scent of deceit” of other less-than-truthful remarks made by President Clinton. In particular, two incorrect anecdotes Gore used during the campaign allowed problems regarding Gore’s credibility to linger well into the 2000 election cycle (Von Drehle A1). On Monday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, USA Today ran a story that asserted, “while addressing a Teamsters meeting, Gore spoke of childhood lullabies and then sang, ‘Look for the union label.’ That song was written in 1975, when Gore was 27” (McQuillan A13). The story left the impression that Gore was lying at the event. The same day that story made headlines Gore tried to explain the apparent inaccuracy of another story he told. In what was dubbed “doggygate” by the New York Post, Gore asserted that his mother-in-law’s medication cost three times as much as the same medication prescribed for his family pet, Shiloh. Later reports indicated that this story was false. According to Kurtz, Gore spokesman Chris Lehane “refused to say that the vice president had misspoken” (qtd. in “Coverage”). Later, the Gore campaign was forced to admit that the story represented a compilation of different events including price figures obtained from a congressional report (Kurtz, “Media Outlets”). The press seized on the misstatements. Newsweek’s Jonathan Alter wrote that in one week, Gore: “was lambasted for claiming to have heard a union song as a lullaby that was actually written when he was in his 40’s and for making up a story about his

mother-in-law and his dog to illustrate a point about prescription drug prices.” Typically, such misstatements by a candidate would not call forth the journalistic fervor that Gore precipitated. However, as this analysis will detail, Gore was not a typical narrator of events.

### Character as a Campaign “Issue”

In addition to raising a stir in the press, the Bush campaign viewed these campaign anecdotes, because of the charges that they were false, as representing crucial ethical linkages between the Gore campaign and the Clinton administration. Bush’s ability to sequence both the fundraising scandals and Gore’s misstatements as part of the Clinton past and emblematic of the future was central to convincing voters that change was necessary in the midst of economic stability. To this end, the strategy of the Republican candidate was to portray the election as a battle of character. As Terry Neal reported, the theme of the campaign was to “challenge Gore’s ethics and leave Bush standing alone as the true reformer and candidate best suited to restore honor and dignity to the White House” (“Bush” A1). The Bush campaign kept the discourse centered on character through their attempts to challenge Gore’s ethical character and by the promotion of George W. Bush as the candidate with moral credibility. During the 2000 campaign, character-centered discourse appeared indirectly through the reiteration of linkages between Gore and Clinton and directly through the constant questioning of Gore’s veracity and credibility. Later portions of this thesis will examine the

effectiveness of this strategy; however, it is appropriate at this time to describe the discourse that surrounded the campaign.

Calling on the American public to view the 2000 election as a referendum on the character of the last eight years was a standard refrain in the Bush campaign's rhetoric. Clifford May, spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said that: "credibility is at the core of a voter's choice for president. Given the experience of the last eight years, Americans would like to know when their president speaks to them, he is telling the truth" (qtd. in Von Drehle A1). May's comments clearly referenced Clinton and implied that Americans would vote against Gore based on the association he had with the previous administration. Another Republican official put it this way: "We've got to make sure that the race remains about Al Gore and a referendum on Bill Clinton" (qtd. in Neal, "Bush" A1). An anonymous Republican strategist described the attempt to link Gore with Clinton best when they told Washington Post columnist Steve Neal that Gore "has a lot in common with President Clinton when it comes to leveling with the American people" ("Bush" A1). Time and time again the rhetoric from the Bush campaign supported an attempt to tie Vice President Gore with Clinton's character flaws to make the case for change (Von Drehle A1).

In addition to fostering the fused image of "Clinton/Gore," Bush and his supporters directly challenged Al Gore's character by questioning his ability to tell the truth. Gore's association with Clinton, his involvement in the scandals described earlier, and how the vice president defined his character as an expert, left the vice president vulnerable to such attacks and are the focus on the third chapter in this thesis. At this point, it is important to demonstrate how the questions that the Bush campaign raised

about the credibility of the vice president helped to define the discourse by keeping it centered on character.

David Von Drehle of the Washington Post held that a favorite quotation in Bush's rhetoric concerning Gore was the question "Why should we believe you will tell the truth as president if you don't tell the truth as a candidate?" (A1). Along the campaign trail Bush and his supporters implied that Vice President Al Gore had a serious problem telling the truth. Vice presidential nominee Dick Cheney openly stated that Gore "makes some things up out of whole cloth and repeats them over and over again until he's called on it" (qtd. in Kurtz, "Coverage"). Bush responded to the "doggygate" story detailed earlier by stating that Al Gore has a tendency to "make up facts to make his case." The governor added, "The idea that he would make up facts about a family member confirms what I have said in the past, that he'll do or say anything to be the president" (qtd. in Kurtz, "Media Outlets").

The following excerpt from the Washington Post was an exemplar of how Bush promoted character over policy as the central issue of the campaign. Neal reported: "When Gore attacked Bush on campaign finance reform last week, Bush struck back instantly, saying that a politician who raised money at a temple where people took a vow of poverty had no moral authority to lecture him" ("Bush" A1). These remarks indicated the GOP strategy, which Slate's William Saletan described as "Bush's long-range game plan—keep the election focused on character, not policy" (qtd. in Kurtz, "Strategy").

Bush's acceptance speech to the Republican National Convention further demonstrated the degree to which character was integral to the campaign message. Bush referenced the term "character" directly numerous times in the address. He held that:



we must renew our values to restore our country. This is the vision of America's founders. They never saw our nation's greatness in rising wealth or in advancing armies, but in small, unnumbered acts of caring and courage and self-denial. Their highest hope, as Robert Frost described it, was to occupy the land with character. And that, 13 generations later, is still our goal, to occupy the land with character. ("Nomination")

George W. Bush's comments signaled to the American public that it was something other than economic prosperity that made our country great; it was our character. Bush also began to assert the credibility of his character. He told the public that, "I will swear not only to uphold the laws of our land, I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God" ("Nomination"). To his immediate audience at the convention, Bush not only highlighted his own character with these remarks, but again reinforced the sentiment that the Clinton administration had brought dishonor to the office of the presidency.

George W. Bush further defined himself as a leader who could be trusted. Bush did this through refrains such as "If you give me your trust, I will honor it" and "He (Gore) trusts the government, I trust you" ("Nomination"). His campaign rallies adopted this Reganesque mantra focusing on the individual over the government. Political correspondent Jacob Weisberg believed that saying "I trust you" to the American public was, in fact, a way to get the public to perceive Bush as trustworthy. Weisberg told NPR's Robert Siegel: "A politician can't say 'Trust me.' It's considered the ultimate insincere line. But what Bush figured out is a politician *can* say 'I trust you.' 'Well, you trust me, I'll trust you back'" ("Interview"). The fact that Bush emphasized trust in his

rhetoric is significant. As later analysis contained in this thesis hopes to demonstrate, establishing a framework that based Bush's character on credibility and trustworthiness would provide a striking counter-story to how Gore defined his character.

The actions of the Clinton administration combined with the involvement of Al Gore in fundraising scandals and campaign trail misstatements along with the effort of the Republican Party established a "climate of interpretation" through which voters were compelled to see the campaign as character-driven (Lewis, 281). As evidence for this claim, a bipartisan Battleground 2000 poll for Voter.com found that forty-seven percent of voters believed that Bush represented "trustworthiness" while only thirty-five percent believed the same about Gore; this was a difference of twelve points (Harris and Connolly A1). Exit polls taken the day of the election showed that values played a central role in how Americans voted. As Bob Edwards reported, "On Tuesday, one quarter of American voters said that the most important thing to consider when voting for a candidate was whether he was honest" ("Exit Polls"). These numbers indicated that the American voter was keenly aware of the issue of character in the 2000 presidential election.

### Preview of Chapters

These events provided the historical and situational context crucial to understanding how the narratives offered in the 2000 campaign were perceived by the American public. Chapter Two of this study will return to a more thorough explanation of narrative theory. Chapter Three will present the development and subsequent

weakness of Al Gore's narrative. Utilizing the structure set forth by Walter Fisher in his study of Ronald Reagan's rhetoric, the study will: (1) trace elements in Al Gore's biography that are essential in understanding the development of his narrative; (2) examine Al Gore's character as represented by the narrative of expertise; (3) describe how Gore's role as narrator interacted with his character as an expert; and (4) discuss the interaction between Gore's narrative and the competing narrative offered by the Bush campaign. Chapter Four will summarize the findings of the study and discuss the implications this work has for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### Overview

The capacity of stories to capture and convey human experience has long been a part of numerous academic disciplines such as philosophy, history, theatre and literature. In the field of communication, rhetorical critic Walter Fisher offered the best-known articulation of narrative theory. By narration, Fisher recognized not fictive compositions but “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (Communication 58). In Sonja Foss’s words, these narratives: “help us impose order on the flow of experience so that we can make sense of events and actions in our lives. They allow us to interpret reality because they help us decide what a particular event ‘is about’ and how the various elements of our experience are connected” (399). From the narrative perspective, rhetorical communication is comprised of stories that compete with other stories for acceptance. The competition between narratives is perhaps most compelling in the political context where the acceptance of one candidate’s story always involves the rejection of others (Bennett and Edelman 160).

To explore the reasons why Al Gore’s story struggled to gain acceptance this thesis first explores the basic premises of Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm. Attention

will be given to explaining the criteria of narrative probability and fidelity. These concepts set Fisher's approach to narration apart from other theorists and suggest a narrative logic that the public uses when deciding between competing stories. The contributions of other theorists, among them William Lewis and Bruce Gronbeck, will be examined to focus on how narratives function in political contexts such as campaigns. This study also will look to Mary E. Stuckey's concept of the narrational and dialogic approaches to storytelling used by former presidents. Stuckey's work bears particular importance to the examination of Al Gore's proficiency as a narrator. The exploration of narrative theory in this thesis will also pay close attention to the concept of character. Building from the works of Fisher, Lewis, and A. Cheree Carlson, the role that narratives play in the formation of the construct labeled "character" will be a central focus of this study.

### Critical Perspective and Approach

Walter Fisher's 1984 essay, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case for Public Moral Argument," proposed a theory of human communication based on narrative. Fisher argued against the increasing technologization of logic. This process, beginning in classical western thought with Plato and continuing through the works of Bacon and Descartes, had the effect of creating "experts in truth, knowledge and reality; to establish the rational superiority of philosophical (technical) discourse; to relegate mythos to myth (meaning fictional); and to downgrade rhetoric and poetic" (Fisher, Communication 7). With this separation, according to Fisher, values were

removed from the concept of knowledge and logic from common, everyday wisdom (Fisher, Communication 7). He identified this trend as the “rational world paradigm,” and articulated the assumptions that it was predicated on:

(1) humans are essentially rational beings; (2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making is argument—clear-cut inferential (implicative) structure; (3) the conduct of argument is ruled by the dictates of situation . . . (4) rationality is determined by subject matter knowledge, argumentative ability and skill in employing the rules of advocacy in a given field; and (5) the world is a set of logical puzzles which can be resolved through appropriate analysis and application of reason conceived of as argumentative construct. (“Narration” 4)

For Fisher, the rational approach was incomplete (Lewis 287). The rational world paradigm represented a society where public moral argument became the domain of the privileged elite schooled in the skills necessary to participate in public decision-making. Since this rationality was not endemic, the public-at-large delegated its power to persons “qualified” to make decisions. Given that technical expertise determined qualification, the rational world paradigm provided a restricted role for rhetoric. Fisher directly attacked the rational world notion that rhetorical communication must be argumentative in form because it failed to account for “the manner in which symbolization is a universal, though non-rational characteristic of human nature” (Lewis 287).

To counteract this increasing rhetorical restriction, Fisher documented the work of many notable rhetoricians, among them Robert Scott, Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, and linguists such as Walter Ong, to demonstrate a counter-narrative on the role of rhetoric,

values and story-telling as related to the conception of knowledge (Communication 15-19). Fisher viewed rhetoric as fundamentally an ontological experience; it is a symbolic transaction “in and about social reality . . . where ‘knowledge’ may or may not loom large” (Communication 17). He further stated: “I do not mean to say that knowledge is unimportant in communication. I do mean, on the other hand, that it is ultimately configured narratively, as a component in a larger story” (Communication 17). From this perspective, human communication was comprised of symbols gathered together in the form of stories to give order and meaning to human experience (Fisher, “Narration” 6). As Kenneth Burke classically observes, “the experience of tasting an orange and saying ‘the taste of an orange,’ that was WHEN STORY CAME INTO THE WORLD” (qtd. in Fisher, Communication 65). In accordance with these views and Alasdair MacIntyre’s statement that man was essentially a story-telling animal, Fisher posited that man should be conceived of as *homo narrans* (“Narration” 2, 6).

From the premise that man was primarily a story-telling animal, Fisher articulated presuppositions of the narrative paradigm:

- (1) humans are essentially storytellers; (2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is “good reasons” which vary in form among situations, genres and media; (3) the production and practice of good reasons is ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character . . . (4) rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story and their constant testing of narrative fidelity whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to

be true in their lives . . . and (5) the world is a set of stories that must be chosen among. (“Narration” 8)

These characteristics suggested that stories are foundational. Stories form the basis of how we understand each other and how the public-at-large uses their natural tendency for storytelling to participate in argument by choosing between competing stories. Although similar to Burke’s conception of dramatism and identification, in that both believe rhetorical experience works through “identification rather than demonstration,” the narrative paradigm proposed by Fisher furthered Burke’s concepts by providing a logic of good reasons by which the public assesses the stories they are presented (Fisher, Communication 19). This narratively constituted logic, comprised of the concepts of narrative probability and fidelity, was the keystone of Fisher’s narrative paradigm.

The logic of the narrative paradigm is narrative rationality. Predicated on the assumption that decisions are not reached by argumentative deliberation, as is the hallmark of rational logic, but through identification, the public utilizes the criteria of narrative probability and fidelity to assess their degree of identification with a story (Fisher, Communication 66). As Bruce Weal explained, narrative probability and fidelity represent respectively the formal and substantive qualities of a story (6).

Fisher argued that narrative probability, whether a story “hangs together” is comprised of three aspects that he described as:

*argumentative or structural coherence*; by *material coherence*, that is, by comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses (a story may be internally consistent, but important facts may be omitted, counter



arguments ignored, and relevant issues overlooked); and by  
*characterological coherence*. (Communication 47)

Thomas Hollihan, Kevin Baaske and Patricia Riley reviewed narrative probability extensively in their article “The Narrative Perspective in Academic Debate.” They suggested that audiences test narrative probability by looking for internal consistency in much the same way one would read a good novel (187). When judging stories, audiences ask questions such as, “Do the dramatic plots and subplots fit together, are there gaps left unexplained?” (Hollihan, Baaske and Riley 187). To evaluate material coherence the audience examines the story from a more or less “factual” position. The key was that the “facts” of the story might not be derived from whether a particular instance is verifiable; rather, the test of accuracy was whether the story realistically accounts for events.

However, Fisher issued a caution to narrators. When relevant, he warned, it is appropriate to be attentive to the demonstrable “facts” of the story (“Elaboration” 350). This caution served particularly interesting to the current study. For Al Gore, a lack of correspondence to verifiable, real world events became a part of the story. Narrators like the vice president who ignore the historical, biographical and cultural context of their stories lack material coherence and run the risk of having their stories impugned (Hollihan, Baaske and Riley 188).

The final test of narrative probability, characterological coherence, was one of the key points of divergence between narrative and traditional logics (Fisher, Communication 47). Narrative rationality demands that narrators and characters are consistent to prove them reliable. Fisher defined character as being comprised of more than a moral orientation but as actions that reflect moral tendencies (Communication 47). Narrative

logic emphasizes the connection between character and action as opposed to rational logic that emphasizes the connection between problems and solutions (Lewis 243; Salvador 283). Fisher asserted:

Determination of one's character is made by interpretations of the person's decisions and actions that reflect values. In other words, character may be considered an organized set of actional tendencies. If these tendencies contradict one another or change significantly, or alter in "strange ways", the result is a questioning of character. (Communication 47)

Characterological coherence also determines allegiance because it provides the public with the ability to predict future actions. Fisher suggested that this ability forms the basis of trust and that trust is foundational to belief (Communication 47). During campaign 2000, character was a central point of contention between the two candidates. As demonstrated later in this analysis, the Bush campaign's success in raising the issue of character, coupled with Gore's characterological inconsistencies, severely hampered the vice president's ability to achieve narrative superiority.

The concept of narrative fidelity requires the audience to move beyond probability and ask themselves to evaluate the substantive dimension of the story. To what degree did the story cohere with the logic or good reasons: or, how well does the story match the audience's existence and experience? (Hollihan, Baaske and Riley 187) W. Lance Haynes suggested that narrative fidelity is attained by remaining plausible within the world-view of the audience (120). Fisher identified narrative fidelity as the "truth qualities" of the story. The criterion of narrative fidelity was another attempt by Fisher to place values back into the rhetorical schema where they can be critically

analyzed (Communication 105). To achieve this, Fisher identified five components in the logic of good reasons:

First is the question of *fact*: What are the implicit and explicit values embedded in a message? Second is the question of *relevance*: Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision that the message bears upon? Included in this question must be omitted, distorted, and misrepresented values. Third is the question of *consequence*: What would be the effects of adhering to the values . . . inherent in this question are concerns of moral obligation . . . Fourth is the question of *consistency*: Are the values confirmed or validated in one's personal experience . . . Fifth is the question of *transcendent issue* . . . are the values the message offers ones that constitute the ideal basis for human conduct? (Communication 109)

Conceptually, narrative fidelity is a lens through which to examine the ideals, myths or values a culture holds in the highest esteem. Those stories that possess the ability to mirror the audience's conception of themselves will gain the widest adherence.

Successful narrators have a keen understanding of the way the audience perceives itself. Moreover, because values are context-specific, audiences may have very different ideas about the values that should be upheld in a political context, such as the office of the presidency, than they do in their everyday lives.

## Critical Implications of Narrative

Narrative's ability to move audiences has its roots in the oralist tradition described by Ong. Peter Brooks argued that the narrative structure is the pervasive influence on our lives. He wrote: "Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves . . . We are immersed in narrative" (qtd. in Berger 1).

However foundational, the narrative form is not innocuous. As Ronald H. Carpenter suggested, within the broader concepts of narrative there are embedded subtle cues of form and appeal to the audience's psychology (231). Kenneth Burke contended that human beings are greatly affected by the psychology of form. Not only are audiences motivated by the need for perfection in the form of fulfillment or completion of the story, but humans also seek to derive meaning from the ordered aesthetic that the narrative provides. Burke wrote: "Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads the audience to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (124). Bruce Weal felt that this conception makes form "rhetorical" (106). Rhetorical critics W. Lance Bennett and Martha Feldman utilized narrative form to study storytelling in trials. They demonstrated that juries ultimately use stories when deciding among competing accounts of the "truth." What they discovered is "judgements based on story construction are, in many respects, unverifiable in terms of the reality of the situation that the story represents" and that "structural characteristics of stories become more central to judgement" (89).

Regarding the audience's acute awareness of narrative form, Lewis O. Mink observed that: "the 'complex form' of narrative makes isolated events and individual statements meaningful. The significance of past occurrences is understandable only in the ensemble of interrelationships that can be grasped in the construction of narrative form" (qtd. in Lewis 289). The stories told about events in this way are able to endow the events in our lives with meaning (Carpenter 231). Narrative gives rhetors the ability to string together the episodes of experience into an understandable and complete whole. Lewis felt this characteristic of narrative form emphasizes the moral dimension of understanding (290). He concurred with Fisher's original contention that narrative argument is a moral inducement inherent with values. Lewis clarified his position:

The nature of the narrative form is said to be moral because stories make events intelligible by imposing a temporal order that leads to some end that defines the moral frame of the story and because the nature of the characters and events in the story will be defined with reference to that purpose. (290)

Because stories have the ability to frame events by making them locatable only within the context of other stories, one is able to narratively build a case for values. Moreover, narrative form shapes morality by giving characters and events coherence within a context where a moral judgement is a necessary part of making sense of the action (Lewis 288). As Ronald Beiner put it, "In attempting to define a conception of the human good, we tell a story" (qtd. in Lewis 290).

The ability of narrative to order events also provides audiences with a sense of predictability because it implies resolution (Haynes 120). In addition, narratives include

the audience in that resolution. Fisher stated: "Any story, and form of rhetorical communication, not only says something about the world, it also implies an audience, persons who conceive of themselves in very specific ways" (Communication 154). In this setting, audience members are not just passive listeners, but actors who have a role to play. Weal suggested that "what makes a story's argument compelling, then, is the ability of the audience to predict how things are going to 'come out' and to throw his or her lot with the 'winning' side, the morally correct position on the issue represented in the story" (106). If the audience sees themselves as participants then the satisfactory resolution of the story depends on their actions.

William Kirkwood described a very different role for the audience of narratives. In his examination of storytelling and self-confrontation, Kirkwood used parables to demonstrate the effect that stories can have on their listeners. He argued that narrative is a powerful way to demonstrate the ultimate essence of things, or show what a thing will come to and that this revelation is a particularly potent way to provoke self-confrontation ("Self Confrontation" 67). Additionally, Kirkwood ceded several advantages to the rhetorical use of narrative form. He found storytelling has the ability to briefly truncate the argumentative, critical process to allow auditors to open up to ideas they otherwise would have rejected ("Self Confrontation" 68). Kirkwood concluded: "when a speaker temporizes 'essence' rather than expostulating about its consequences, he or she may deter (or delay) listener's rational, critical assessments of the confrontive message" ("Self Confrontation" 68-69). Of paramount interest to the discussion of the presidential debates later in this analysis, Kirkwood unearthed distinct advantages to employing narrative instead of a question-and-answer mode. He suggested that by using storytelling

in response to cross examination a rhetor can subvert the questioner's attempted dominance by reversing the method of inquiry and relational authority. In addition, the act of telling a story demonstrates a personal form of discourse that is openly emotional, understandable to common-sense interpretation, and oriented toward action rather than intellectualizing ("Self Confrontation" 71).

In the literary vein, narrative theorists have emphasized both the more macroscopic form of narrative as well as the question of how meaning is derived from stories on a microscopic level. To understand this question, Arthur Asa Berger drew from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Saussure posited that we understand concepts negatively, in terms of what they are not. This crucial insight, known as binary opposition, is that human beings derive the meaning of a term by its relationship to other terms (Berger 29). As Saussure stated, "The most precise characteristic of concepts is in being what others are not" (qtd. in Berger 29). This observation highlights a crucial point in later analysis. If we understand individual concepts in stories through what they are not, then the dominating campaign narratives have implicit negative arguments. Fisher recognized this concept as the rhetoric of affirmation and subversion. He wrote: "any definition implies that other definitions are inferior, and any refutation implies that something ought to displace that which is refuted" (Communication 144). For example, if Vice President Gore were labeled as not credible to hold the office of president, then, by default, the opponent is able to gain the positive which, in this case, made Bush the "credible" candidate.

## Narrative Studies of Political Discourse

William Lewis remarked that the inquiry into political discourse paralleled Hayden White's well-known inquiry into historical narrative. Lewis found it useful to question, "With what kind of meaning does storytelling endow political events?" (288). Authors W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman addressed that question. They agreed with Fisher's contention that narrative shapes the public's views of rationality, objectivity, morality and self-conception (159). However, they cautioned against the impulse of many politicians to reduce complex and ambiguous issues to simple either-or positions embodied in political narrative. For Bennett and Edelman, the intriguing characteristic of a narratively constructed social world is the link it provides among its components. They wrote: "the who, what, where, why, how and when that gives acts and events a narrative frame . . . also determines who are virtuous, who are threats to the good life, and which courses of action are effective solutions" (160). Through this means, politicians gained legitimacy for particular policies.

Bennett and Edelman also explored the enthymematic nature of political narrative. They held that in political discourse, narratives are frequently evoked by a single term or reference instead of a recitation. Political messages serve as incitements to audiences, similar to a Pavlovian cue, prompting audiences to leap to a conclusion if it provides comforting normative conclusions reaffirming their beliefs (165). Bennett and Edelman wrote:

When plot fragments evoke familiar beliefs and values, the psychological inclination is to regard selected documentary detail as "facts" that



authenticate the story. In this fashion, fragments of real-life situations become perceived as wholes, while the excluded aspects of situations are neglected, rationalized away, or dismissed as the weak arguments of opponents who have failed to grasp the real issues at stake. (167)

The authors did not specifically mention negative ads in their analysis, but the preceding comments indicate that their insights can be useful when examining audience response to oppositional ads that invoke narrative.

In the field of communication, numerous scholars have considered narrative in their analysis of rhetorical communication and this study draws from many of them. As previously discussed, William Lewis used narrative rationality to account for the apparent incongruity of President Reagan's popularity despite opposition to his policies (288). His study centered on the power of narrative form in building up Reagan's popularity. Lewis found that Reagan employed two types of stories in his political narrative. Reagan used anecdotes, short stories or jokes intended to spark interest and establish meaning in reference to a larger frame of understanding. For Lewis the anecdote was the verbal counterpart of the visual image. The second type of story that Reagan relied on was myth. Myth structured the message and provided a sense of destiny and importance (282).

Lewis also analyzed how the narrative frame allowed Reagan to move evaluations of his rhetoric away from standards of empiricism and toward more general notions of his character and moral truth (284). Importantly, Lewis also described a weakness of dominant political narratives. Due to the fact that political narratives gain much of their strength from internal consistency, they become constrained because such consistency

must remain permanent if the narrative is to retain its power (296). As it will be demonstrated in subsequent analysis, Al Gore suffered from this constraint when trying to respond to questions regarding his veracity.

Mary Stuckey posited that storytelling was a crucial element in the rhetoric of modern presidents. She classified presidential storytelling style as either narrational or dialogic. According to Stuckey, presidents who adopted a narrational style tended to present an overall theme that functions as a framework for interpreting presidential events (46). Presidents such as Ronald Reagan who typified this type of approach were able to maintain interpretive dominance through their role as narrator. Stuckey wrote that the “telling of smaller, shorter, more discrete stories that buttress the integrity of that theme and ‘prove’ its validity . . . ensure the prominence of the story—and the storyteller” (46). The narrational approach was further characterized by its involvement of the audience. Audience participation was essential to the success of narrational presidents and legitimated both the story and the storyteller (Stuckey 48).

In contrast, presidents such as Jimmy Carter who were representative of the dialogic approach lacked the ability to gain interpretive dominance. Dialogic presidents were “less likely to present an overall theme . . . Rather, the speaker presents smaller bits of information and options and leaves the presentation of the overall theme to the media or others” (Stuckey 49). Presenting specific details rather than the integration of details into an overall theme was common among presidents that chose this approach. Stuckey concluded that presidents using the dialogic style had difficulty controlling the agenda and were at the mercy of others. Jimmy Carter’s frequent responses to questions about his vision by detailing his policy approach to the problems facing the country exemplified

the difficulty that dialogic presidents have in integrating policy into their overall story (Stuckey 51). Stuckey's study sheds some light on the problems that Al Gore faced as a presidential candidate. As this analysis will detail, Gore had considerable trouble in his role as narrator. This thesis will assert that Gore, like Jimmy Carter, typified the dialogic style of presidential storytelling. Gore's decision to adopt this approach made controlling the narrative discourse during the campaign extremely challenging.

Bruce Gronbeck's article on negative narratives in presidential campaign ads clarifies an important linkage between narrative form and character. Stemming from Fisher's earlier claim that narratives are moral constructs, Gronbeck argued that narrative is preferred to rational, argumentative discourse when morality is the subject matter. He wrote: "When the subject matter is virtue and vice, the key to success is the description of actions. We must try to prove that our villain's ignoble acts are intentionally performed" (Gronbeck 343). Narrative is used to reframe events in the past and imbue individual past events and statements with new meaning. It is also used to move audiences from the sins of the past to a connection with future behavior and to provide the necessary basis for motivating voters. A candidate is blameworthy for future sins that they might cause (Gronbeck 337). This coherence is brought to bear by the employment of narrative structure.

Gronbeck concentrated on narrative character and competing ethoi as central to the campaign context. He explained: "In candidate portrayals, we come upon the grounds upon which people are expected to vote and the fountainheads for our political understanding of political process" (Gronbeck 335). From this perspective, the heart of campaigning is the creation of stories (335). Sanford Schram agreed that political actors

use stories as their scripts for engaging in political performance (6). Schram further cautioned that “since it is always the case that more than one story can be told to make sense of any particular areas of concern or issue, stories are necessarily not innocuous and disinterested but instead can be potentially dangerous and interested” (6).

Gronbeck’s observations led him to describe the trend in campaigning as the “narrativization of political campaigning” (343).

A. Cheree Carlson also focused on the close connection of character to narrative form. Specifically, she examined the power of character in public moral argument in her study on the Henry Ward Beecher scandal. In her analysis, Carlson emphasized the conception of character in terms of a value orientation rather than the person him/herself (“Character Invention” 409). Through examination of social expectations for both the feminine and ministerial character, Carlson discovered that a single narrative element, in this case character, may alter the audience’s perception of events (“Role of Character” 39). Regarding the trial of Henry Ward Beecher, she noted: “The issues revolved less around logic and evidence than around the nature of the ministerial role. These issues were embedded in the narratives used by the participants to recount the events of the scandal” (“Role of Character” 38). Carlson used narrative character to demonstrate the importance and functions of cultural narratives in the human decision making process (39). She further explored the construction of character in the letters of Maimie Pinzer. From this case study, she concluded that character is key to gaining audience adherence and control of a story.

Larry David Smith expanded his use of narrative beyond character to examine the Democratic and Republican Party platforms and nominating conventions of 1984. Like

many of the aforementioned authors, Smith emphasized the importance that narratives play when inducing the public to action. He noted that narratives “provided distinct rationales for action through emphasis on different transcendent issues” (94). The stories Smith uncovered in his analysis were consistent with the party ideology. For instance, Democrats identified themselves as the “party of the people” in contrast to the villainous, elite GOP (93). To support this proposition, Smith described how the Democratic Party focused their platform and resolutions around the principle of “justice” for all (94). Smith concluded: “The 1984 platforms represent two coherent constructions of political ideology. Though written by partisan pens, these stories provided the motives for action on issues of appeal to both their particular audience and those outside the party” (97). While acknowledging the power of narrative to establish what is deemed transcendent, it should also be noted that narratives are not devoid of historical or situational background (Fisher, Communication 144). As previously mentioned, stories gain much of their meaning from the ability to structure understanding of past events and, based on those events, predict future behavior. Effective narratives are therefore comprised of transcendent values in accord with common day-to-day experience.

Colin Hay studied this characteristic of narrative in his article “Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the Winter of Discontent.” Hay made several observations that prove useful for analyzing the presidential election of 2000. The article detailed how narrative can function to discursively create crisis. Importantly, those who created the crisis had the ability, by defining it, to control what is necessary for its resolution (2). Narratives that involve crisis, like other stories, “competed with other stories in terms of ability to find resonance with individuals’ and groups’ direct, lived

experience, and not in terms of their 'scientific' adequacy as explanations for the condition they diagnose" (2). He continued by demonstrating the print media's role in framing "crisis." The central role of the media was not direct, ideological indoctrination, but the ability to frame the understanding of events. He wrote that the print media derived its power by "the ability to frame the discursive context within which political subjectivities are constituted, reinforced and re-constituted. Texts are not ideological in themselves, they become ideological in their active appropriation" (5). Hay displayed this appropriation through analysis of headline, photo and banner text from British tabloids in 1978-1979 during the "winter of discontent," England's most politically turbulent time since the Second World War. The examination of how crisis was narratively created and maintained during the "winter of discontent" anticipated many of the events in the contest for president of the United States. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the "crisis" that was raised in the campaign was one of rhetorical construction. Historically, the nation was enjoying an all time high in prosperity. However, the Bush campaign successfully created and maintained a crisis of character in the contest for the White House.

### Methodology

This thesis analyzes the rhetoric of Al Gore, his surrogates, the press and his opponent, Texas Governor George W. Bush, to examine the narrative that promoted the vice president's character as an expert on the detailed policy issues facing our the United States during the 2000 presidential election. Fisher's definition of narrative as not fictive compositions but "symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them" will be adopted for the following

analysis (Communication 58). Therefore, it is not expected that Vice President Gore's rhetoric will overtly speak this narrative; rather this analysis will abstract his story from his actions, words and deeds. Utilizing the narrative perspective requires critics to make at least three important discriminations:

- (1) one will focus on the sequences of symbolic actions and their meaning,
- (2) one will recognize that no text is devoid of historical, situational or biographical context, and (3) one will recognize that the meaning and value of any account are always influenced by how the account or story stands with or against other stories known to an audience or other observer. (Fisher, Communication 144)

The following analysis of Al Gore's rhetoric will attempt to make these discriminations.

To accomplish this task, Chapter Three will first provide the biographical context that is crucial to understanding how Al Gore's narrative was perceived during the campaign. Next, two features of the narrative form, character and the role of the narrator, will be examined in detail. To determine how Al Gore defined his character during the election, the analysis that follows will be modeled after the formats used by Walter Fisher and William Lewis in their studies of Reagan's narrative. When determining how Gore performed as a narrator of his own story and of smaller stories that the vice president used to support his policies, Foss's suggestions for narrative critics will be used as a guide. In particular this thesis will seek to answer questions Foss poses such as: "What kind of person is the narrator?" and "Does the narrator adequately connect the various elements of the narrative to one another to create a cogent and meaningful whole?" (403). The question of "How reliable is the narrator?" will also be given significant attention

(Foss 403). In presenting Gore's narrative, this thesis hopes to provide a meaningful interpretation of how stories influence the audience's perception of a candidate (Foss 400).



## CHAPTER III

### ANALYSIS OF AL GORE'S NARRATIVE

Depending on who was asked, Albert Arnold Gore, Jr., was either born into a Washington political dynasty destined to become president or he was a field-plowing farmer's son from the humble town of Carthage, Tennessee. Long-time Gore supporters boasted that he had been running for president since he was in the tenth grade. When Gore joined the Clinton ticket in 1992, his father and former United States Senator Albert Gore, Sr., was quoted as saying "We raised him for it" (Saunders 13). Al Gore described his entry into politics differently. In his acceptance speech to the Democratic Convention, Gore defined himself as a reluctant politician, someone who had experienced the dismay and despair brought about by Vietnam, Watergate and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. When he came home from Vietnam he believed that "running for office was the very last thing I ever thought I would do" ("Acceptance"). There are differing versions of almost every event in his political and personal life. The story of Al Gore began prior to his campaign for president of the United States in 2000 and events such as those described above influenced how we perceived Al Gore in that race. As Walter Fisher writes, "no text is devoid of historical, situational and biographical context" (Communication 47). This thesis will now turn to providing the biographical context needed to understand the character of Al Gore. Specifically, this

thesis will argue that Al Gore's biography was marked by charges of exaggeration and hypocrisy all leading to the perception that, potentially, audiences could not take him at his word. The differing versions of Gore's own biography were evidence that the vice president had trouble asserting interpretive dominance over the events in his own life. This thesis will account for Gore's inability to achieve narrative dominance. The following analysis will argue that Gore's narrative downfall was due to: the way Gore had defined his character as an expert and the consequences of that decision; Gore's performance as a narrator; and Gore's inability to integrate his factual errors into a framework accounted for them while retaining his character. This chapter will conclude with an examination of how the oppositional narrative promoted by Gore's challenger Texas Governor George W. Bush during the debates and in negative ads gained acceptance and ultimately assumed control of the discourse.

### The Prince of Tennessee

It is hard to say if David Maraniss and Ellen Nakashima intended to make a political double entendre by entitling their biography of Al Gore The Prince of Tennessee. However, those who tended to view the vice president as a Machiavellian politician certainly might have interpreted it as such. Throughout campaign 2000, Al Gore struggled to maintain interpretive dominance over his own life story. In his speech to the Democratic Convention on August 17, 2000, the vice president introduced himself to the American people as his own man. To "tell the people who I truly am," Gore emphasized many of the biographical details that he frequently spoke of on the campaign

trail: his childhood in Tennessee; the time he spent at Harvard University; his service in Vietnam; his work as a reporter at the Nashville Tennessean; and how he distinguished himself as a young congressman from Hardeman County who led the fight against toxic waste and to protect the environment (“Acceptance”). Gore attempted to identify with his audience by sharing his story. He offered the details of a life that included a loving and demanding father, military service and a long career of exposing the wrongs of government and promoting causes that most Americans would certainly agree with, such as the right to clean drinking water. However, for each glimpse Gore offered into his life, a competing story found its way into the American consciousness.

Al Gore’s childhood in Possum Hollow was disputed by accounts that his “real” residence was a northeastern prep school or room 809 of the Fairfax Hotel on Embassy Row in Washington. The centerpiece story of Gore’s boyhood had a young Al forced to plow a steep hillside. Accounts differ as to why his parents had him plough the slanted, steep hillside. Biographers Maraniss and Nakashima have Gore’s father watching his son and remarking, “I think a boy, to achieve anything he wants to achieve, which would include being president of the United States, oughta be able to run a hillside plough” (qtd. in Chinni 16). Bill Turque provided a different account of the event. He depicted a sarcastic Pauline Gore as recognizing myth making when she saw it. She responded, “Yes, a boy could never be president if he couldn’t plough with that damned hillside plough” (qtd. in Chinni 16). An incredulous Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Nicholson doubted the event ever even happened. He was quoted in the conservative Weekly Standard as saying “How preposterous. Real farmers, even poor ones, have been

hiring bulldozers to clear land since before Al Gore was born” (Forbes R1). He accused Gore of “shoveling more of it now than he ever did back then” (Forbes R1).

Similarly, the vice president’s version of his service in Vietnam was questioned in the press (Seper A1). Gore spokesman Chris Lehane told the Washington Times that Gore’s Vietnam experience was “an important piece of his biography and background” (qtd. in Seper A1). On the campaign trail Gore’s rhetoric was, on occasion, supplemented with photos of Gore in fatigues and carrying an M-16 rifle (Seper A1). That Gore served in Vietnam cannot be disputed, but almost every other detail of his service, including his motives for enlisting, became fair game in the battle to tell Gore’s story. Gore recalled the difficulty of his decision to enter the army, stating:

I remember the conversations I had with Tipper back then, and the doubts that we had about the Vietnam War. But I enlisted in the Army, because I knew that if I didn’t go, someone else in the small town of Carthage, Tennessee, would have to go in my place. (“Acceptance”)

Despite his heroic admission, the press did not ignore the strategic implications of Gore’s enlistment (Von Drehle; Connolly A1). Senator Gore, Sr., faced a difficult race for reelection that year and was criticized for his opposition to the war. Opponents characterized Gore, Jr.’s, enlistment as a campaign ploy to help his father win reelection. Others took issue with Gore’s account of his Vietnam service during the 2000 campaign. The Washington Times, under the headline “Questions Linger on Gore’s Vietnam Duty,” portrayed the vice president as frequently exaggerating the danger that he faced while serving his country.

Of the many events in his life that would be open to competing accounts, the vice president's involvement in the development of the Internet received the most attention (Saunders 10; Zelnick 15; "Problem with Truth" A18). Gore's precise statement to Congress was that he had "taken the initiative in creating the Internet" (qtd. in Pooley, "Man Behind Myth" 40). Pooley suggested that this was an unfortunate way to say that he sponsored a bill that provided funding for transforming a then Department of Defense network into today's Internet ("Man Behind Myth" 40). The claim attributed to Gore and repeated in the press and by the opposition was that the vice president claimed to have invented the Internet. The "inventing the Internet" story was so pervasive that it even became fodder for the late-night TV comedians (Busch 22).

During the debate over the vice president's actions, a perception that Gore had trouble communicating his story to the American public was clearly evolving. A memo written by Gore's communications director Arlie Schardt in 1988 during his first presidential campaign revealed that, to a lesser degree, Gore struggled with the same problem in that campaign. The memo read: "Your main pitfall is exaggeration. Be careful not to overstate your accomplishments" (qtd. in Chinni 16). Al Gore was not the first presidential candidate to overstate his accomplishments. He was, however, a presidential candidate whose exaggerations become a significant issue in the campaign. The crucial insight left to be discovered is when did, as Gore called it, "putting the best face" on your accomplishments (qtd. in Pooley, "Man Behind Myth" 40) start to sound more like saying *anything* necessary to become the next president of the United States?

In separate analyses, biographers Debra Saunders and Bob Zelnick both pointed to the 1996 Democratic Convention as the moment when Al Gore opened himself up to

intense press scrutiny. Eric Pooley of Time Magazine argued that the night of August 28, 1996, forever changed the vice president's public image ("Man Behind Myth" 40). Gore had playfully danced the Macarana earlier that evening, but his tone from the convention podium was much more somber. He spoke of his sister Nancy's battle with lung cancer. Nancy Gore Hunger began smoking when she was thirteen and was hopelessly addicted to cigarettes when she died at the age of forty-six. An emotional Gore told the audience that:

Tomorrow morning, another thirteen- year-old girl will start smoking. I love her too. Three thousand young people in America will start smoking tomorrow. One thousand of them will die a death like my sister's. And that is why, until I draw my last breath, I will pour my heart and soul into the cause of protecting our children from the dangers of smoking.  
(“Convention”)

The speech was met with thunderous applause in the hall and well received by television viewers. Some may have quibbled about the use of personal pain to promote policy, but even Republican San Francisco Chronicle columnist Debra Saunders “could not help but be struck by the guy’s decency” (4). Yet, undercutting the speech’s impact were revelations that after his sister’s death, he continued to extol the pleasures of tobacco farming and receive political contributions from the tobacco lobby (Saunders 4). Explaining the apparent hypocrisy proved hard for the vice president.

This event damaged Gore’s public persona and the damage was exacerbated six months later by his response to the fundraising scandal involving a Buddhist temple in Hacienda Heights, California described earlier in this analysis. After it was revealed that

campaign funds were generated by the appearance, Gore was pressured to explain. Bob Zelnick described Gore's struggle to define the event: "Gore in successive interviews characterized the event as a 'community outreach event' a 'finance-related event' and 'a political event and I knew finance-related people who were going to be present'" (292; "Al Gore's Problem" A18). Even worse was the press conference held by Gore in which he repeated the phrase "no controlling legal authority" seven times in twenty-four minutes (Zelnick 292; Saunders 201). The New York Times criticized Gore for his "duplicity" in responding to the event: "The vice president has many gifts, but they do not seem to include candor" (qtd. in Zelnick 293).

President Bill Clinton, whom Al Gore served under in the White House, certainly saw his share of scandal, both fundraising and otherwise. However, never in recent political history has there been a candidate who has undergone the type of intense "factual" scrutiny that Al Gore endured. The independent Project for Excellence in Journalism reported that more than three-quarters of Gore stories focused on negative themes such as the perception that he lies or exaggerates (Pooley, "Man Behind Myth" 40). A February 2000 poll found that 61% of Americans felt that Al Gore would tell the American people what he thought they wanted to hear (Saunders 214). The perception reached critical mass in September of the 2000 campaign when anecdotes meant to put a humanizing spin on Gore's policy agenda instead put Gore on the defensive (Kurtz, "Coverage"). Such was the case when he apparently misstated the cost of his mother-in-law's prescriptions. Gore advocated prescription plans for senior citizens by telling the public that the family dog Shiloh was able to obtain the same medication that his mother-in-law used, but that she paid three times the price. The Boston Globe, USA Today, New

York Times and Los Angeles Times all ran stories examining falsehood of the vice president's statement (Kurtz, "Coverage").

Politicians have long used stock anecdotes such as the one that propelled "doggygate" as verbal counterpoints to visual images (Lewis 284). When employed by politicians, simple stories carry much larger messages *if* the audience's experience tends to lead them to believe the moral (Lewis 282). In Gore's case, it was not so much that the audience disbelieved the moral of the story as they did its narrator. Gore's contested biography, illustrated by charges that he was hypocritical and prone to exaggeration, fostered the perception that the vice president made statements that were inconsistent with reality. This was a potentially damning impression because Al Gore had defined his character as one who excelled at representing verifiable facts.

Is Knowing Everything Enough to be President:

Al Gore's Character as Represented in His Story

Referring to Al Gore, Dante Chinni posed the question "is knowing everything enough to be president?" (16). The quandary illustrated Al Gore's long-standing reputation as one of the most intelligent and knowledgeable politicians to have ever served in Washington. In fact, Gore's seeming disconnect with the truth left many wondering along the lines of "how is it that someone so *smart* could be so *stupid*?" In fact, the only thing left uncontested in the 2000 election was that people believed Al Gore had the intellectual capacity to stand as president of the United States. His supporters as well as his critics extolled the vice president as "highly educated," "profound," "highly



conversant in the realms of science, technology, communications and international economics,” and “drawn to complexity” (Zelnick 293; Saunders 39; Harris “President” A1; Pooley, “Man Behind Myth” 40). The dominant focus promoting Gore’s character in the 2000 campaign was primarily composed of the belief that he had the expertise to hold the job. Gore argued throughout the campaign that his credibility or character derived from his experience and asked voters to use that criterion as the basis for determining how they should vote. From the narrative perspective, the decision to adopt a narrative of expertise had serious limitations.

The vice president’s surrogates, the press, and the candidate himself supported this narrative of expertise. The hallmarks of this narrative were: a focus on the natural intellectual ability of the candidate; a continual reiteration that the candidate possessed superior, detailed policy knowledge regarding issues; and an assertion that the knowledge was derived from his experience in office. When asked to describe Al Gore, his supporters responded with stories that upheld his reputation of being an intellectual driven by curiosity. Stories characterizing both the private Gore and the public servant drew from this image. Family friend Jerry Futrell was interviewed for a profile on Al Gore for National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered.” He described the vice president: “Sometimes I think he is so intelligent that he gets a little above the average person, sometimes explaining and in detail. He wants you to be as informed as he is” (“Tracing the Personal”). In George Magazine, campaign consultant and author Naomi Wolf lauded Gore’s “nerd-visionary instincts” and labeled him a “savant” (qtd. in Saunders 188). Gore, at the Al Smith Dinner during the 2000 campaign, acknowledged the pervasiveness of the image portraying him as a smarty-pants policy wonk. The vice

president was greeted with peals of laughter when he told the audience about his favorite game show. He said: “one of my favorite shows is ‘Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?’ Well, it should really be called ‘Who Wants To Be, After Taxes, A \$651,437.70 Person?’” (“Al Smith”). The comment, made in humor, pointed to the fact that the American public believed that even the private Gore was capable of knowing exactly what the tax rate for game show winners would be because he knows *everything*. Gore’s daughter Karenna also embraced this view of her father. In a family story that is now part of the Gore legend, Karenna and her father brainstormed ideas to respond to Jack Kemp’s football analogies in the 1996 debate. Karenna suggested, “Dad, just tell him, ‘Jack if you keep talking about football, I’ll have to give you a lecture about chlorofluorocarbons.’” (qtd. in Saunders 48). Gore used the line and got a laugh. The style worked for him. He was successful by reminding people that he was intellectually superior (Saunders 48).

The perception that he was an expert on the issues also characterized how Gore was represented during his career in office. It was his intellectual drive and attention to detail that distinguished him from other politicians. One of the stories that helped to define Gore early in his career involved his extraordinary capacity for detail regarding technological issues, specifically the MX missile. As a young congressman, Gore saturated himself with detail and spent weeks studying proposals. As a result, he was an integral player in the 1983-84 MX Missile compromise. Judy Fahys, a reporter for the Salt Lake City Tribune, talked with Gore about the issue and came away convinced that “He was smart. It wasn’t about politics. It was really about ideas” (qtd. in Saunders 30).

Gore's ability to understand and embrace technology cemented his casting as an intellectual, technological expert. Eric Pooley wrote:

Ask Gore a question today and sometimes he responds as if he is dictating a treatise. He loves academic arcana and obscure scientific theories, some deep and others New Age-y. He is drawn to complexity—abstract systems, chaos theory, the computer processing technique of distributed intelligence—and when he encounters someone who strikes him as intellectual, Gore likes to put his brain on display and unleash his knowledge. ("Man Behind Myth" 40)

Gore did not back away from such descriptions. He reinforced them by actions such as showing off the use of his palm pilot at campaign stops (Harris A1).

The vice president's responsibilities in the Clinton White House were in line with the public expectation regarding his intellectual capacity. Gore presided over issues like telecommunications, the environment, high technology and space. Clinton delegated much of the nation's foreign policy involving Russia to Gore. In sum, Gore had earned the name "junior president" by shouldering more responsibility than many of his predecessors ("Caught" 40). Saunders wrote "In the Clinton administration Gore brought balance . . . he had cultivated a reputation as a thinking man's politician. Clinton excelled in empathy, Gore embodied the intellect. Where Clinton was instinctive, Gore was profound" (39). Even those who were critical of Gore and his service under Bill Clinton upheld the character of expert that Gore represented. Debra Saunders wrote that there is "probably no other contemporary politician who can match Gore for pumping out ideas, position papers and proposals about government and the social world in which we

live” (10). Gore’s biographer and former ABC news correspondent Bob Zelnick told NPR reporter Anthony Brooks “the vice president’s intelligence may represent one of his greatest assets”(“Tracing the Personal”)

Gore’s surrogates constantly reinforced this perception during the 2000 campaign. Gore’s wife Tipper, who would be expected to know her husband better than anyone else, suggested her husband was the best man for the job because “I think my husband is ready for the presidency, because he’s got twenty-four years of experience in public service” (“Talk with Vice President”). Bill Clinton, in a rare campaign appearance with Gore, took the opportunity to describe why we should elect Al Gore:

on the issues that will shape our future, I can tell you that as we move into the future, the nominee of the Democratic Party, my partner and friend for the last eight years, understands where we are, where we are going and how it will affect ordinary citizens more than any other public figure in this country in the last twenty years. (“Michigan”)

Again, his service and knowledge defined the vice president’s character. The president asked that the audience vote for Gore because he *knows* more than any other candidate based on his career in office.

Greg Simon, one of Gore’s chief policy advisors, saw the difference between Al Gore and George W. Bush in clear terms. He said: “The main difference between a Bush White House and a Gore White House is that in a Gore White House, ideas would actually be generated in the Oval Office” (qtd. in Harris “President”). Simon’s comments displayed a crucial implication that characterized the Gore narrative. If their candidate was an expert and better prepared on the issues to serve as president, then the opponent,

Texas Governor George W. Bush, did not have the expertise or intellectual skill to fill the post. In this sense, like Saussure and Berger described, every criticism of Bush's intellectual capacity bolstered the perception that Gore was the smarter candidate. So when Paul Begala criticized Bush for "routinely being unable to string together a coherent sentence to explain his own proposals" and reminded the audience that "Americans will have to decide whether Bush's uncertain command of the facts and his garbled language bear on his ability to be an effective leader" what he was also clearly saying is—our candidate does not have those problems ("Meet the Press").

Political ads that promoted the vice president also picked up on this theme. The Gore campaign ran an ad in Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and 15 other states where the candidates were running neck and neck that openly questioned Bush's experience (Gerstenzang and Chen A1). The text of the 30-second ad detailing Bush's Texas record concluded with the refrain "Is he ready to lead America?" The key word here was "ready" and the implication was that Bush is obviously unprepared. However, the campaign phrased the message in the form of a question asking audiences to fill in the blank. At this point, the Gore campaign asked the audience to draw upon the story of Gore's experience and make the connection that he was the candidate who *was* ready for the office of president.

For Gore, the preference to invite the audience to perceive him as an expert manifested itself in his constant call to view the campaign from the "issues." If the vice president was defined as the intellectual superior, it then follows that he would have the upper hand on the issues. At a campaign stop in Quincy, Illinois, Gore called on the audience to look at the "facts." He said, "I've taken the risk of presenting specifics and

getting into the issues because I think that you deserve to know the facts and have the opportunity to make a judgement for yourselves” (“Quincy”). At another campaign event, Gore called on the nation to “focus on the issues and not negative personal attacks” (“Campaign”). In his speech to the Democratic Convention in August of 2000, he informed the audience “I’m here tonight to talk seriously about the issues. I believe people deserve to know specifically what a candidate proposes to do. I intend to tell you tonight. You ought to be able to know and then judge for yourself” (“Acceptance”). He reinforced that statement by saying, “those are the issues and that’s where I stand” (“Acceptance”). In the same speech, the vice president concluded by referring once more to the perception that, by virtue of his expertise on the issues, he should hold the nation’s highest office. He said: “I know my own imperfections. For example, I know that sometimes people say I’m too serious, that I talk too much substance and policy. Maybe I’ve done that here tonight. But the presidency is more than a popularity contest” (“Acceptance”). The audience was invited to see the campaign as a contest where knowledge may not make a candidate popular, but it makes him/her the best choice for president.

The most successful of Gore’s campaign communications was his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention. The speech, written by the candidate himself, was an attempt to combine the problem-solution approach to issues that defined Gore-the-expert with a more “heroic” advocate Gore, fighting battles on the public’s behalf. Gore spoke of his desire to fight on behalf of America’s working families multiple times during the address. The speech took on a populist tone as the vice president promised to “fight” for: “targeted affordable tax cuts for working families”; “rebuilding and

modernizing crumbling schools”; “a real enforceable patients bill of rights”; “the single greatest commitment to education since the G.I. Bill”; “tax cuts that go to the right people”; “a new tax-free way to help you save and build a better nest egg”; “you”; “another 50,000 new police”; “tougher penalties on those who misuse the Internet”; “every school in the nation”; and “the people not the powerful” (“Acceptance”). This litany of proposals was grounded in the issues and commiserate with his persona as expert, but displayed an attempt to move away from solely being defined by his expertise in crafting policy. That attempt was most fully realized by Gore’s statement that:

For almost 25 years now, I’ve been fighting for people. And for all that time, I’ve been listening to people, holding meetings in the places where they live and work. And do you know what? I’ve learned a lot . . . because I want to stay in touch with your hopes . . . And because I’ve learned that the issues before us, the problems and the policies all have names. And I don’t mean the big, fancy names that we put on programs and legislation. I’m talking about names like Nystul, Johnson, Gutierrez and Malone. (“Acceptance”)

Here Gore’s experience was recontextualized. He used his experience to not only demonstrate his knowledge of policy but linked that knowledge to a personal knowledge of his audience.

After the speech, Gore received a substantive jump in the polls (Hershey 55). However, he was unable to sustain that momentum. Despite an initial positive reaction to the speech, the image of Gore as the technical “expert” still reigned. The reasons that

image persisted were numerous. Some critics of the speech viewed it as an expression of a “different Gore.” Cameron Forbes described it as:

Washington Gore and Southern Al, changing places in a single speech.  
 With Washington Gore, each word stands alone, to a ponderous  
 metronome beat. There is a deadening drone of facts and good intentions.  
 But suddenly it's all twang. Southern Al is striding the stage arms  
 pumping. He is roaring: “I want to fight for you.” Then the switch is  
 turned off and Washington Gore walks away. (E1)

Forbes’ interpretation of the speech referenced earlier problems that Gore had experienced with appearing inconsistent. It was possible for the audience to find Gore’s role of expert conflicting with more active, heroic roles. The expert persona did not adhere to the types of values that the public expects from a president. As Lewis suggested, “Technical accomplishment has its place . . . expertise is useful, even essential, in making applications and in completing details of policy” (294). However, Lewis added “one need not be a nuclear engineer or a tax accountant to know that nuclear strength ensures peace or that simplicity brings fairness” (294).

The audience may have abandoned this new theme because it did not match their experience in a historical sense. Gore’s populist mantra about fighting on behalf of “working families” may have failed to sustain interest because at that time in the country’s history many people felt that they were doing just fine. At the beginning of the speech, Gore said, “Instead of the biggest deficits in history, we now have the biggest surpluses, the highest home ownership ever, the lowest inflation in a generation, and instead of losing jobs, we now have 22 million good new jobs, higher family incomes”



(“Acceptance”). It perhaps was possible that the country rejected Gore's role because didn't feel like they needed someone to fight for them.

The final possibility suggested to explain why Gore did not manage to keep the country reminded of the man they saw at the convention was more strategic. The Gore campaign chose to return to the narrative that Gore was the expert in order to ensure his dominance in the final event in the campaign, the debates. The Gore campaign anticipated that this event would be won or lost based on the ability of both candidates to argue their policy positions. The decision to pursue framing the election from this perspective proved fatal to Gore's ability to maintain his own story and provided him with few answers to defend against the opposition's attempt at redefining his past.

The rhetoric claiming that Gore was an expert on the issues reached critical mass in the days before the first debate. In the New York Times, Vice President Gore's campaign enhanced Gore's advantages by portraying Governor Bush as, “a neophyte frightened by any format that requires him to give lengthy answers and stray beyond sound bites” (qtd. in Bruni A18). Bob Shrum, a senior Gore advisor, also told the New York Times that the Bush campaign was “not eager for debates because Mr. Bush did not want to have a substantive discussion of issues” (Bruni A18). Criticizing Bush's ability appeared unnecessary when the Chicago Sun Times declared of Gore that:

in the history of presidential debates, no other candidate has been through more of these televised confrontations. He is a more polished debater than Richard M. Nixon in 1960 or Jimmy Carter in 1980. That's no accident. This is Gore's fourth national campaign, going back to his '88 bid for the presidential nomination. Gore was at his best in the '96 vice presidential

debate with GOP opponent Jack Kemp. In last winter's Democratic presidential debates, Gore decisively outpointed Bill Bradley. (Neal, "Stiff Opponent" A29)

In the Bradley debate referenced above, Gore and his campaign had so thoroughly developed their candidate's image as the expert, they took to putting out one page rebuttals to Bradley's answers while the debate was ongoing (Saunders 216). In every paper and every poll the expectation was that Gore would out debate Bush. Steve Neal wrote, "It is doubtful whether Bush can outpoint a seasoned debater like Al Gore" ("Stiff Opponent" A29). Larry Bivins summed it up this way, "details are Gore's strength, he has positioned himself as a champion of the issues" (ARC).

The 2000 presidential race was in a statistical dead heat and both candidates eagerly anticipated courting the audience of an estimated ninety million people. The debates presented a rare opportunity for evaluating the candidates on what one voter described as an "equal plane" (Neal, "Stiff Opponent" A29). As Alan Schroeder related in the Chicago Sun Times just days before the event, "Debates are the only event on the campaign schedule untainted by money. They exist outside the whirlwind of fund-raising and political announcements . . . no infusion of cash can upgrade a candidate's performance; no deep-pocket donation can buy a more favorable set of ground rules" (qtd. in Neal, "Stiff Opponent" A29). John McLaughlin best represented the crucial importance of the debates in his comments to the McLaughlin Group. He believed that "these engagements were about the men themselves—about their character, about their judgement—and people were looking for little cues as to what their character really was" ("McLaughlin Group"). McLaughlin was right.

At a fundamental level, the 2000 presidential election was like every other election this country has held for the nation's highest office. The public was charged with picking the candidate best suited to serve. What made this election unique was that to accomplish this task, the public relied heavily on its ability to know the character of a candidate. The way that the audience was able to "know" Al Gore's character was grounded in their understanding of his personal story. As Angel Medina argued, it is "necessary to define our reason as primarily biographical, that is above all narrative" (qtd. in Fisher, Communication 10). The candidate's story mattered because it was the primary conduit through which to reach voters. Character was so important because it represented more than just an adopted role, but a "generalized perception of one's fundamental value orientation" (Fisher, Communication 144). In campaign 2000, Al Gore chose to present his character by demonstrating that, by virtue of his experience, he was an expert on the issues. Intellectual expertise was the predominant value that Gore represented. By choosing to emphasize expertise, Gore set a difficult expectation that would haunt him in the subsequent campaign communications examined in this thesis.

Specifically, Gore was plagued by the interaction between his character and the narrative form. As Bruce Weal argued, narrative form gave the audience members the power to make predictions based on the story (106). Therefore, future actions should always be in sync with past performance. If we believe that Gore was an expert on issues and facts and that this represented his primary value, then we are led to predict that his future actions should demonstrate that value. Gore's narrative raised the expectation that he should be able to get everything right. This type of expectation was impossible to maintain and left Gore open to glaring inconsistencies. Traditionally, narrators have the

power to move standards away from empiricism as long as the audience agrees with the moral of the story being recounted (Lewis 288). Instead of being able to draw on this power, Gore's narrative actually led the audience to expect the type of precise empiricism that was part of his story.

Furthermore, the constant emphasis Gore placed on "issues" and his frequent calls for audiences to "judge for themselves based on the facts," ("Acceptance") while demonstrating his comfort with his own expertise, may have further damaged his ability to function as the narrator of his own story. These comments indicated that Gore, when serving as a narrator, tended to adopt what Stuckey called the dialogic style. Gore's preference for presenting policy detail combined with his willingness to allow others to judge for themselves were hallmarks of other dialogic presidents such as Jimmy Carter. This approach represented several drawbacks for Gore. As Stuckey wrote, dialogic presidents "minimize the interpretive dominance of the presidency as an institution as well as their own dominance as president" (49). In adopting a more "rational" persona, Gore may have delegated the power of telling his story to the opposition.

#### The Battle of the Narrators: Gore vs. Bush in the Presidential Debates

During the three presidential debates, narrative argument took several forms. First, both candidates evidenced the overriding theme of Al Gore's perceived dominance as an expert on the details. Second, both speakers employed story telling to illustrate their policies. This strategy proved damaging to Gore in the first debate. When his stories were examined, they contained factual "errors" and helped to create the

appearance of inconsistency. Third, propelled by this inconsistency, Governor Bush used the narrative form to subvert his opponent's command over the issues and open Gore's character up to question. In these debates, Gore's narrative of expertise began to disintegrate. This was due to the fissures in his story created by misstating the facts. Bush was also involved in disassembling the Gore narrative by promoting a competing interpretation of Gore's character. These narratives previewed how the Bush campaign would later use Gore's inconsistencies as the text for oppositional ads reinforcing his image as an impugned narrator.

Debate moderator Jim Lehrer's first statement in the first presidential debate was directed to Al Gore and went right to the substance of how people viewed the campaign. Lehrer said, "You have questioned whether Governor Bush has the experience to be the president of the United States." In the same way that Gore's surrogates had promoted Gore's ability by questioning Bush's, Lehrer's statement to Gore confirmed that the audience tended to assume Gore's intellectual superiority. During this debate, Gore, true to his pre-debate hype, furthered this image by aggressively challenging Bush's policies. As James Carney reported, it appeared Gore was "better prepared and better spoken. He was so in control of his material that he turned his proposals in to a bludgeon" (54). In one exchange, the vice president concluded, "I'm not going to go to—to calling names on his facts; I'm just going to tell you what the *real* facts are." He rattled off budget numbers, interrupted statements by Bush as well as Lehrer, and spoke out of turn to clarify the "facts." These domineering postures, including the now-famous heavy sighs and eye-rolling, played into the story representing Gore as a man who has studied his whole life in anticipation of this one assignment, and was ready to take Bush to task.

Gore also employed anecdotes to humanize his policies. He told the following story to reinforce his commitment to education:

I'd like to tell you a quick story. I got a letter today as I left Sarasota, Florida . . . the guy who served us lunch got me a letter today. His name is Randy Ellis. He has a 15 year-old daughter named Kaylee who is in Sarasota High School. Her science class was supposed to be for 24 students. She is the 36<sup>th</sup> student in that classroom; she sent me a picture of her in the classroom. They can't squeeze another desk in there for her, so she has to stand during class. I want the federal government . . . to make improvement of our schools a number one priority so Kaylee will have a desk and can sit down in a classroom so she can learn.

On the surface, this anecdote functioned as Lewis describes; it illustrates the character of the issue while making the idea of policy more vivid (281). However, after the conclusion of the debate, the public learned that the *real* story possibly differed from Gore's account. Specifically, claims that the narrative lacked probability surfaced. Competing stories said that the girl did not have to stand, except for that day or that new equipment purchased for the lab was being installed. Gore was trapped in a narrative paradox. For most rhetors, if narrative dominates, a story does not have to be true as long as it is true-to-life (Lewis 288). The public should have been drawn to the moral of the story and accepted the premise that schools are overcrowded. Instead, the public focused on the facts. This focus was commiserate with the framework that Gore had encouraged for most of the campaign and illustrates a major consequence for choosing the "expert" role. Gore's narrative never moved the audience beyond the facts. It did not provide a

satisfying structure for Americans to understand individual events such as the above error. For Gore, the challenge to his story was extremely damaging. He was caught getting the "facts" of the case wrong. For the audience, this did not match the Gore they knew; that Gore was an expert. Erring on the details of the story violated Gore's narrative character and left him looking as if he had misled the public.

Only moments later, the moderator asked both candidates to point to an example that demonstrated that they, as president, would be able to deal with the unexpected. Governor Bush answered with a story. He said in part:

I can remember the fires that swept Parker County, Texas. I remember the floods that swept our state . . . I've got to pay the administration a compliment—James Lee Witt of FEMA has done a good job working with our governors in times of crisis . . . It broke my heart to go to the flood scene where a fellow and his family were completely uprooted. The only thing that I knew to do was to get aid as quickly as possible, which we did with state and federal help, and to put my arms around the man and his family and cry with them.

Bush depicted himself as a hero, a man of action as well as compassion. After the governor's response, Vice President Gore added to the story. He offered: "Yeah, first I want to compliment the governor on his response to those fires and floods in Texas. I accompanied James Lee Witt down to Texas when those fires broke out, and FEMA has been a major flagship project of our reinventing government efforts, and I agree, it works extremely well now." Gore attempted to subsume Bush's story by offering a larger one. Gore represented "the administration" and by physically accompanying James Lee Witt

to Texas, it was Gore, not Bush, who was responsible for being the hero to the people affected by the story. Gore pointed out that FEMA had been a major flagship project of his reinventing government policy initiative, and he was able to imply that it was the vice president, by virtue of putting the mechanism into place, who deserved the credit.

This exchange clearly illustrated an attempt by the vice president to assert himself as a narrator to gain interpretive dominance over the events after the Texas floods. Gore stepped into the story as a presidential figure appearing much larger than the governor. However, after the debate, there again were challenges to Gore's role in the story. The public questioned the narrative's probability. Was it true that Gore accompanied Witt or did another administration office make the trip? In fact, Gore did not accompany Witt in Texas. Gore's character as an expert was crumbling under the inconsistencies of his actions as a narrator. These omissions violated Gore's narrative and ceded to Bush a major advantage. The errors of "fact" allowed Bush to suggest a competing narrative that presented Gore's character as a front and held that the vice president would say anything he thought would help get him elected. Bush's criticism stuck because it provided a powerful frame for understanding and accounting for Gore's inconsistencies. As Lewis suggested: "The use of character as artifice will only succeed as criticism if the narrator is perceived as constructing a fictional persona" (286). When Gore did not adhere to the standards he had set forth in his narrative, it appeared probable that his character was a fictional construct designed to win election. The competing Bush narrative that Gore lacked credibility did what Gore's narrative could not; it accommodated Gore's flaws and structured them in a way that made sense to voters.



Bush used this line of attack in the first debate and built upon it in the two subsequent debates. In the midst of an exchange with the vice president over prescription drugs, Bush quipped, "This is a man who has got great numbers. He talks about numbers. I'm beginning to think not only did he invent the Internet but he invented the calculator." Laughter met this response. Bush sparked interest by moving the debate away from the numbers into an area more difficult for Gore to defend. This reflected what Kirkwood described as "shifting the mode of discourse in the dialogue from an expository, question-and-answer form to the narrative mode . . . (this) not only subverted dominance, it reversed both the method of inquiry and the pattern of authority in the relationship" (71). Bush truncated the prescription drug policy exchange thereby avoiding having to answer Gore's questions and reminded the audience that Gore "exaggerated" his participation in the creation of the Internet. Bush challenged Gore's authority on the facts by suggesting that Gore manipulates facts for his own advantage. The implication was if Gore misled the public in one instance, it is predictable that he would do so again.

Again, near the conclusion of the first debate, Bush eluded discussion of policy by shifting attention from a Gore proposal to inconsistencies in the Gore narrative. The vice president challenged Governor Bush directly to support the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill. He stated, "I wish Governor Bush would join me this evening in endorsing the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill." When Lehrer turned the question to Bush, he answered, "You know, this man has no credibility on the issue. As a matter of fact, I read in the New York Times where he said he co-sponsored the McCain-Feingold campaign fund-raising bill. But he wasn't in the Senate with Senator Feingold."

In this exchange, like the others, Bush was able to subvert Gore's power by reminding the audience that the vice president's authority on the issue had been impugned.

Carlson suggested critics cannot underestimate the "importance of character in the process of gaining an audience and gaining control over the story" ("Character Invention" 417). The contest of character between Al Gore and George W. Bush in the presidential election was changing due to each candidate's ability to perform as a narrator. The debates were a watershed moment in the battle for interpretive dominance. It was a battle that Al Gore was losing. Because Al-the-expert misspoke during the debate, Bush's counter narrative gained credibility. If Al Gore was unable to respond convincingly by integrating these mistakes into his own narrative, he risked allowing others to do it for him. In fact, because of the restraints placed upon him by his character as expert and his failure to abandon that persona, he was unable to retain control.

The second debate found Gore wounded by the damage done to his character. Again, Gore was unable to behave in this debate in a manner that was consistent with the way voters expected. He was unable to aggressively assert his dominance on policy details because his claim to factual accuracy had been challenged. When he and the governor disagreed about hate-crimes legislation, Gore tentatively attempted to correct Bush's statement: "I guess I had misunderstood the governor's previous position . . . Well, I thought that there was a controversy at the end of the legislative session . . . Am I wrong about that?" He concluded, "I may have been misled by all the news reports about this matter." The attack dog style that characterized his first clash with Bush was significantly watered down. This left the vice president in an uncomfortable position. He appeared weak, as if he was not being true to who he really was.

While the Gore strategy wavered, the Bush attempt to constantly push the competing interpretation of Gore's actions did not. When pressed with the issue of gay marriage, Bush again moved the debate to a more generalized notion of character. He responded, "I'm not sure what kind of view he (Gore) is ascribing to me. I can just tell you, I'm a person who respects other people. I respect their--I respect-- one night he says he agrees with me then he says he doesn't. I'm not sure where he's coming from." Here Bush not only critiqued the vice president, he identified with the audience. Bush, like the audience, was taken aback by Gore's inconsistency. Later the same evening Bush responded to a challenge by saying: "we can throw all kinds of numbers around. I'm just telling you our state comes together to do what's right." Clearly the message was, don't trust the numbers this guy offers you because they may be wrong. The moral implication of the statement was you can trust me to do what's right.

Near the close of the debate, Bush offered his interpretation of Gore's credibility:

I think credibility is important. It's going to be important to be--for the president to be credible with congress . . . And yes, I think it's something the people need to consider. This isn't something new. I read a report or memo from somebody in the 1988 campaign--I forgot the fellow's name-- warning then-senator Gore to be careful about exaggerating claims . . . But the people are going to have to make up their own mind on this issue.

And I-- I'm going to continue to defend my record and defend my propositions against what I think are exaggerations.

A pattern was evolving in Bush's rhetoric. He began to link his competing narrative representing Gore's character to other pre-existing stories to gain control over the story as

a whole (Carlson "Role of Character" 50). The counter narrative now had more ontological implications. Bush was not only capitalizing on Gore's fall from expert, he explained that fall by linking it to Gore's biography. In essence, the opposition asserted control over the understanding of Gore's past. Gore was no longer an expert, even on the details of his own life.

The polls confirmed that Gore suffered under this line of attack aimed at destroying his character by exploiting the fissures in his own narrative. A Gallup-CNN-USA poll showed that on honesty, 48 percent of voters picked George Bush, while 34 percent chose Gore. The vice president's approval ratings fell 16 points after the debates from 59 to 43 percent. Independent pollster John Zogby said, "Gore's numbers have been going down everyday. The news about Gore has been dominated by his embellishments and exaggerations and that has been more dominant in the news than anything about his message" (qtd. in Hallow A1). The Gore campaign responded to Bush's strategy by saying "The Bush campaign has completely abandoned an issue-based strategy . . . they are abandoning the issues" (qtd. in Shepherd A8). This response evidenced a continued preoccupation with the issues, a stance more characteristic of Gore the expert. Gore's spokesperson underestimated the degree to which a character-based campaign became an "issue" for voters. The portrayal of a their candidate's character was not an element that the Gore campaign should have so readily dismissed. As Bruce Gronbeck wrote "if we believe that campaigning is a character-centered activity, then the portrayal of candidates—self and other—takes us to the middle of voter decision making and political myth. In candidate portrayals, we come upon the grounds upon which people are expected to vote and the fountainheads for our understandings of political process" (335).

The refusal by Al Gore to respond to his mistakes in a way that restored the vice president's character was devastating. It allowed others to do the job for them.

### Is Doing or Saying Anything Enough to be President:

#### Gore's Character as Represented in the Bush Story

This thesis has examined Al Gore's narrative from the perspective of "self" portrayal and now turns to how Gore's narrative was portrayed by "other," specially, how it was reconstituted in the oppositional ads run by the Bush campaign. In a series of three ads, the Bush campaign and the Republican National Committee presented their interpretation of Gore's story. The first ad, entitled "Really" ran in 16 states and featured some of the contested events in Gore's biography. A woman's voice narrated:

There's Al Gore reinventing himself on television again. Like I'm not going to notice. Who's he gonna be today? The Al Gore who raises money at a Buddhist temple? Or the one who now promises campaign finance reform? Really? Al Gore . . . claiming credit for things he didn't even do.

Al Gore's alleged actions in the commercial were integrated into a sequence that allowed the viewer to gain predictive value regarding his future actions. The narrative asked that the audience view Gore's character based on the Bush campaign's interpretation of his actions. The ad also clearly attempted to involve the audience by acknowledging their inherent ability to know when someone acts in an "immoral" way. Lewis found this moral dimension of narrative form particularly powerful. He wrote: "narrative form

shapes morality by placing characters and events within a context where moral judgment is a necessary part of making sense of the action . . . by suggesting that all important events are open to common sense understanding" (288). This ad played on a common sense interpretation of Al Gore's actions. Complex psychological interpretations of Gore's character were avoided. No psychobabble about a demanding father or the difficulty in being held to high expectations were offered, just the idea that if he can't be trusted to act in a way consistent with his own image, he can't be trusted in other areas.

A second ad produced by the Republican National Committee used Gore's own words against him. In this spot, the narrator asked the audience to:

Remember when Al Gore said his mother-in-law's prescription cost more than his dog's? His own aides say the story was made up. Now Al Gore is bending the truth again. The press calls Gore's Social Security attacks "nonsense". Governor Bush sets aside \$2.4 trillion to strengthen social security and pay all benefits. (Gore's voice) "There has never been a time in this campaign that I have said something that I know to be untrue.

There has never been a time when I have said something untrue."

(Narrator) Really? ("Newspapers")

This ad directly challenged Gore's presentation of the truth. It subverted Gore's authority on issues and facts, something that his own narrative should give him control over, by reminding audiences that the vice president made statements in other cases that were discovered to be untrue. Both ads were damning to the Gore narrative because they featured Gore. They drew from Gore's own narrative and built upon what we already believed. However, he was cast not as hero but as a villain who intended to deceive.

This ad clearly was linked to the first, not only by the repetition of the word "Really" but in that both provided a narrative sequence to the events of Gore's life. The ads moved the audience from Gore's past to the election while commenting on the future. The story told in the ads was "from time-past, focusing on the guilt or innocence of the story's characters" (Gronbeck 335). Furthermore, Gronbeck contended, "the story told by a narrative ad is in the time-present, in the electoral contest, focusing on whom voters should prefer as a result of what they have learned from that story" (335). This structure struck a responsive chord.

The final ad examined concluded with the statement, "Why does Al Gore say one thing, when the truth is another?" (Bush "Advertisement"). If the audience had been following the Bush campaign's interpretation of Gore's actions, they were able to predict the answer. These ads struck at Gore's Achilles heel. They gave coherence to Gore's own narrative by encouraging the audience not to see Gore's inconsistencies as inconsistent with his character. Gore's inconsistent character was the real Gore. The narrative form of the ads was a powerful conduit for channeling challenges to Gore's expert rational persona. In just 30 seconds, a few pregnant references evoked an entire story (Bennett and Edelman 165). Furthermore, the ads provided no time for a rebuttal.

This campaign was about character. Al Gore, by representing himself as an expert in a narrative based on his experience as a public servant and natural intellectual ability, was left in a precarious position. The role of expert proved extraordinarily constraining and left little, if any, room for natural, human error. From the narrative perspective, inconsistency was a fatal flaw. As Fisher explained: "the narrative perspective uses consistency with the story as the primary measure of truth"

(Communication 295). Gore's persona as an expert was an oddly "superhuman" role in that it did not place its hero in the middle of the action, but its expectation was nonetheless impossible to achieve. As mentioned earlier in the analysis, the expertise narrative may also have not been in line with the public's expectation of what constitutes a strong leader. Its "value" is not necessarily moral in the sense that if a candidate lacks expertise they can still judge right from wrong. A final negative outcome from employing the narrative of expertise was that Gore, while raising the public expectation regarding his intelligence and command of issues, lowered the bar for his opponent. In essence, it gave Bush permission to get things wrong. Lewis wrote "not all stories work equally well. The quality of a story will make it more or less effective in disclosing some truth about the human condition" (290). For Al Gore, the story of expertise ultimately did not serve him well. The next chapter of this thesis will examine these issues in detail.



## CHAPTER IV

## CONCLUSION

This thesis dealt with what ABC news correspondent Cokie Roberts called the story of the 2000 presidential campaign. She identified the story line as “Bush isn’t smart enough and Gore isn’t straight enough” (qtd. in Alterman). Media critics such as Howard Kurtz of the Washington Post and Marjorie Randon Hershey confirmed the consistency with which the press used these stories to frame campaign coverage. However, the tendency to view the election as a contest between a candidate who possessed policy expertise, but not moral superiority, and a candidate who was a little slow on the issues but a credible, moral individual, was not relegated to the press. As Election Day approached, ordinary citizens across the country increasingly were aware of these stories because they directly were supported by both candidates’ rhetoric and were fundamental to understanding what the campaign was about. While critics such as Hershey attempted to demonstrate the existence of these stories, this thesis examined why the stories resonated with the public. Focusing specifically on the narrative of expertise generated by Al Gore, this thesis was based on the premise that: (1) the historical situation, grounded in the personal scandal represented by the impeachment of President Clinton and reinforced by the rhetoric of the Republican candidate George W. Bush, raised public expectation about the character of both candidates; (2) this expectation framed the

campaign as a contest of character; (3) the character of both candidates was constituted by narratives told by and about the candidates; and (4) that the American public used these narratives to understand the campaign.

The campaign of 2000 was strongly influenced by the setting in which it occurred. If the election were to be judged on the economic success that the country was enjoying and support of the president's policies, conventional wisdom would predict that the Republican candidate would not have had much of a chance winning the White House. However, the Republican Party and their candidate George W. Bush built on public sentiment that the current administration under Bill Clinton lacked personal morality. They used this sentiment to create an ethical crisis in the White House. This was a critical move that enabled the Bush campaign to call for a change in the direction of the country. Without this crisis, the Bush campaign would have been in a tough spot. Because so many felt that the country was on the right track economically and in terms of policy direction, it was crucial that George W. Bush and his campaign rhetorically create a crisis and define its resolution: removal of the Clinton administration, now being represented by Vice President Gore. Bush was successful in making the election a referendum on the character of the past administration and stressing to the American public that this election was about a restoration of dignity and credibility to the White House. As vice president, Al Gore had been tainted by just enough scandal to be connected to the ethical morass created by the Clinton administration. As Saunders wrote: "Like some literary concept of original sin spreading outward to contaminate everything about it, the Clinton scandals began to engulf Gore despite his attempts to paint himself as a Boy Scout trapped in a bordello" (199-200). Gore helped to reinforce

the association by his role in events such as the 1996 fundraising scandals, particularly his appearance at the Buddhist temple. These events supported and gave credence to the call by George W. Bush to view this election as a contest of character to restore credibility to the White House.

The election of 2000 fundamentally was an election based on the character of the two men running for the nation's highest office. This made the 2000 campaign an excellent case study for the narrative perspective. Media reports framed by these stories dominated campaign coverage (Kurtz, "Coverage"; Hershey). The narratives presenting Gore as an expert and Bush as representing moral credibility were intrinsic to the race. In addition, narrative analysis of the 2000 campaign was particularly important because it was not a race best understood from an objective, rational standpoint because the discourse was dominated by discussion of character. Character, Fisher argued, was defined as "a set of actional tendencies reflecting values" and best judged by narrative reasoning (Communication 147). Furthermore, Gronbeck expressed, "narrative is preferred to argumentative discourse when the subject matter is morality" (343). Based on these accounts, narrative theory was essential to explaining the 2000 presidential campaign because, as a public, we reason about an individual's character based on the values represented by their actions in stories. In Beiner's words, "In attempting to define a conception of the human good, we tell a story" (qtd. in Lewis 290). In the electoral contest for president, both candidates attempted to tell a story that defined their character and sought the vote based on the values their character represented.

From the very beginning of his career, Vice President Al Gore defined his character as an expert on the important policy issues that faced the nation. This thesis

sought to establish the progression, evolution and ultimate vulnerability of that narrative in the 2000 presidential campaign. This thesis utilized Fisher's examination of Ronald Reagan's rhetoric as a model to focus on defining two critical aspects of Gore's overall narrative: Gore as a character presented in the story and Gore as a narrator. Gore's character as expert was established by the candidate and his surrogates in stories that focused on Gore's natural intellectual ability; the story reiterated that Gore possessed superior, detailed policy knowledge regarding issues; and asserted that such knowledge was derived from his experience in office. The candidate promoted by these stories was fit for office based on his ability to navigate the policy details that would confront Gore as president. By defining his character as based on expertise, the Gore campaign created a demanding expectation for Gore as a narrator to fulfill.

To appear as a consistent, trustworthy narrator, the vice president should have had the type of command of the issues that we came to expect from his characterization in the story. This was almost impossible to maintain and created enormous problems for the candidate. Gore, when serving as a narrator, was unable to keep up with a standard that allowed for no error. When the vice president employed anecdotes to humanize policy proposals on the campaign trail and in the debates and these anecdotes were proved to be false, it created the impression that Gore was an inconsistent narrator. His reliability as a narrator was impugned because the Gore-in-the-story and the Gore-as-a-narrator roles conflicted with each other in these moments of error. This conflict impacted the perception of the entire campaign.

Gore, when exposed to the glaring inconsistency between how he had defined his character and how he acted, lost interpretive dominance over his own story. This allowed

the Bush campaign to recontextualize the vice president's own biography and use it as evidence to demonstrate the fidelity of how they defined Gore. The competing narrative promoted by Bush explained Gore's inconsistencies by arguing that, regardless of personal ethics, the vice president lacked credibility and would do or say anything to win the election. This competing narrative did what Gore's own narrative could not do: explain and provide meaning to Gore's inconsistency, factual inaccuracies and exaggerations. As articulated by Lewis and demonstrated in this thesis, not all stories are created equal. Some work better than others to disclose the truth (Lewis 290).

### The "Expert" as Character in Politics

Gore's choice to adopt the character of "expert" in his story had several important consequences in the political context. First, the role of expert does not necessarily imply the type of leadership style that we have come to expect or desire in an office-in-chief. As Lewis explained: "Technical accomplishment has its place . . . expertise is useful, even essential, in making applications and in completing details of policy—but one need not be a nuclear engineer or a tax accountant to know that nuclear strength ensures peace or that simplicity brings fairness" (294). What Lewis alluded to is the public's desire for confidence in a president's ability to know the difference between right and wrong and take *action* based on that knowledge. The ability to "do the right thing" is not necessarily knowledge that is gained through extensive, technical expertise. As Hershey described, "When faced with a crisis, presidents are not bound by presidential promises or party

platforms . . . Their personal qualities however are more enduring and can be valuable in managing the extraordinary demands of the presidency” (46).

Technical expertise, instead of promoting the image of an active president, often is seen as a hindrance to an individual’s ability to take action. Gore, by portraying himself as an expert, may have gained the upper hand on comprehending intricate policy detail, but he may also have encouraged people to view his leadership style as analytical as opposed to active. This downside to the expert narrative was evident in Gore’s campaign manager Bill Daley’s comments: “Gore believes that most problems can be solved through deliberate analysis or better procedures” (qtd. in Harris A1). On the subject of a Gore presidency, John Harris wrote: What is clear is that Gore’s fascination with detail, and his insistence on understanding policy problems not merely in outline but in their most intricate dimensions, would be at the heart of his governing style” (A1). These comments, while consistent with the expert persona, were potentially damaging to a candidate seeking the office of president because they tended to paint the vice president as someone who might get bogged down in details instead of recognizing the larger question of “doing the right thing.”

Description of a candidate’s character as being an expert also created a potentially passive role for the audience. Fisher believed that the audience implied by a narrative was as important as historical groundedness, timing and style in determining the believability of a narrative (Communication 154). He wrote: “The key to ethos (character) of Presidents is their conception of the relationship to the people, for in this conception lies their image of themselves and the role of President” (Communication 154). The audience, in the role defined by Gore’s narrative of expertise, could be

perceived as passive because their collaboration was not required in determining the important issues facing the country. Because Gore was the policy expert, he was expected to dictate that agenda. Again, instead of being able to determine what is right or wrong based on intuitive, common sense that the public at large possesses, Gore, by definition as expert, would tell the American public what needed to be done.

The audience's resistance to this passive role was evident during the campaign. It could be found in the descriptions of Gore as a smarty-pants candidate who behaved arrogantly. In Saunders' biography of Gore one Democratic congressional aide described Gore as: "Arrogant. He loved being the best looking and the smartest boy in the class and he felt he didn't need his colleagues to succeed" (30). This type of criticism was repeated throughout Gore's political career and the 2000 campaign. Hershey believed that Gore came across to the American public as "holier-than-thou" (54). United States Representative Thomas Bliley echoed these comments. Bliley said: "He gives the appearance that 'I'm Al Gore and my ideas are superior to your ideas so you ought to capitulate'" (qtd. in Harris A1). This thesis argues that it is more than mere sour grapes that extracted this type of response to Al Gore. By positioning himself as an expert, Gore minimized the idea that multiple points of view could be accepted. As former chief of staff to the vice president Jack Quinn recounted, "Gore prefers clarity over consensus . . . Gore is more prone than Clinton to seeing policy choices in black and white" (qtd. in Harris A1). Gore's tendency to promote himself as an expert damaged his ability to invite audience participation and to allow the audience to see themselves as active and connected to the workings of their government.

Finally, as described earlier in this thesis, all narratives used in the promotion of one candidate imply the reverse about their opposition. The principle of negative implication assumed, for example, to say one candidate is the “best” person for the job implies that the other candidate is the “worst.” The impact of using the narrative of expertise described in this thesis was weak from a campaign perspective because, in a contest where morality was important, what it implied about the opposition was not a moral condemnation. For Al Gore to critique George W. Bush’s intelligence and experience was not to say that he suffered from any moral deficiency. From the point of view of the Gore rhetoric, it was possible for Bush to know the difference between right and wrong. However, the same was not true for Gore from the perspective of the competing Bush narrative.

Though the employment of a narrative of expertise contained inherent drawbacks as illustrated above, these deficiencies alone did not cause Vice President Gore’s rhetoric to fail. As Fisher argued, all stories are judged against competing stories; therefore, it is important to compare and contrast Gore’s narrative with the competing Bush narrative and describe the interaction. Gore’s narrative rhetoric collaborated with the Bush narrative in two critical ways. First, Gore’s narrative of expertise actually ceded to Bush permission to make mistakes of fact. Second, Gore, when perceived as an inconsistent narrator, effectively bolstered the probability and fidelity of the Bush narrative promoting the governor as the morally credible candidate.

The debates most clearly illustrated how Gore may have actually given Bush a major advantage by defining himself as an expert on the issues. During the three times that the candidates met, both candidates made errors. In fact, many argued that Governor



Bush's errors were of a more substantive nature than Gore's. Glenn Kessler of the Washington Post noted that Bush made "highly misleading statements about his support for a Texas patients' bill of rights and a bill allowing women direct access to their ob/gyn" (qtd. in Kurtz, "Pundits"). Other journalists pointed out errors that Bush made by claiming that the Gore campaign had outspent his campaign and that all three men accused of heinously murdering James Byrd Jr. had been sentenced to death (Kurtz, "Pundits"; Bivins ARC). Eric Alterman laid the blame for Bush's alleged "license to lie" at the feet of the media. He wrote: "reporters did not notice that Bush had a far more serious credibility problem than the vice president. Bush has proven himself untrustworthy on issues of considerable more public import, rather than on those trivial aspects of his biography." While Bush did in fact make substantive factual errors, it was not just a function of the media that these errors were overlooked. By defining himself as the expert, Gore lowered the expectation for Bush. If we were to believe Gore's story, then it makes sense for Bush to make mistakes. Bush's errors are not of concern because we have been encouraged to make that assumption about him.

In addition to providing Bush with considerable latitude regarding the facts by defining himself as an expert, Gore, when caught in inconsistencies between how his narrative represented his character and his actions as narrator, further benefited the Bush campaign. Gore's inconsistency as a narrator provided "proof" for the Bush narrative which held that Bush had a morally credible character and that Gore was not credible—he would do or say anything to gain election. In addition, by bolstering the probability and fidelity of Bush's narrative, Gore enhanced the governor's credibility. The vice president's role as a narrator was crucial to unlocking why issues surrounding

his veracity were of such importance to the 2000 campaign. It wasn't just that the vice president occasionally got the facts wrong that caused Gore trouble. The problem was that Gore had defined himself as an expert and when he erred as a narrator, it was completely inconsistent with how we thought he should act. In light of Fisher's definition of character as a set of actional tendencies, Gore's actions, when inconsistent, not only damaged his character, but actually helped promote the opposition's story. Inconsistency alone would have damaged Gore's character; however, because it played into the way that the other campaign had defined the vice president, inconsistency became a sign of something more sinister. The narrative promoting Gore as an expert, when proven false by Gore's actions, worked in tandem with the Bush narrative. Because Bush had helped to frame the campaign as a contest of character and then developed a narrative that promoted himself as being the one who was credible and trustworthy, Gore's faults collaborated with Bush's rhetoric. Bush's narrative was predicated on the idea that Gore's character was lacking, that it was not credible. Gore's inconsistency gave additional power to Bush's narrative because Gore's actions made Bush's competing narrative appear reliable. Furthermore, because Bush appeared as a more trustworthy narrator, he received the additional benefit of being able to draw on public forgiveness for the errors that the governor did make. As Fisher wrote: "When one has determined that a person—ordinary or presidential—has a trustworthy and reliable character, that his or her heart is in the right place, one is willing to overlook or forgive many things: factual errors if not too dramatic, lapses in reasoning, and occasional discrepancies. These come to be seen as aberrations, probably induced by circumstances but not by incompetence" (Communication 147-48). Again, this frame permitted Bush to make

mistakes. In addition, it may have made incidents like the revelations of the governor's drunk driving arrest appear as aberrations and less damaging to the credibility of his character.

At this point, it is important to note that the election itself was one of the closest elections in our country's history and that some still insist that Gore actually won the election. Indeed, Gore did win the nation's popular vote. However, the Bush campaign controlled the rhetoric of the 2000 presidential election from the narrative perspective. Due to the rhetorical domination by the opposition, this study concludes that Gore's narrative failed. Gore's narrative failed to control the dialogue based on the premises that it was not in accord with the historical situation in the country and the narrative was overly constraining to Gore when attempting to respond to charges against his credibility.

On Election Day, Newsday reported that exit polls conducted by the Voter News Service discovered that voters: "regarded honesty as the most important personal quality and found Bush far more honest than Gore" (Toedtman A37). As Bush put it: "Clinton fatigue was real" (22). To explain the preoccupation with issues of personal morality, this thesis upheld Phillip's contention that the atmosphere during the 2000 election was similar to the Watergate scandal in the 1970's in the sense that public perception of government was affected by scandal. However, as described earlier in the thesis, this contest was unique because the country was also enjoying unprecedented economic growth. Both legacies of the Clinton administration—personal scandal and a strong economy—led voters to consider the moral aspects of their next president. If voters were disgusted by the personal scandal, they paid particular attention to the character of the next president in order to avoid future scandal. Or, from the other perspective, voters

generally in favor of the economic direction the country was pursuing could afford the luxury of looking to other factors, in this case character, to make their decision. Gore's narrative of expertise was out of sync with either of these two perspectives because it lacked a moral dimension. It defined Gore's character as a technical, rational expert but did not offer moral credibility.

Because Gore's character was limited to that of "expert," and lacked the dimension of moral credibility, it constrained Gore's response to charges against his character during the campaign. When critics attacked Gore for making factual errors in the debates or exaggerating aspects of his biography, he was left with few options that were consistent with his character to explain his actions. The most direct way to put such criticism to rest would be to admit that he was wrong. However, because he had so thoroughly set himself up as an expert, to admit error time and time again would not alleviate the charges that he was lacking character. Constant admission of error would, in fact, deny the character that he had spent so much of his political career developing. Even outright contrition would leave the vice president looking like he was violating the expectation we had for him. To avoid negating his character as expert, Gore answered criticisms by claiming that his opposition was engaging in negative attacks and trying to move the campaign away from the issues. He was unable to put the errors behind him by integrating them into the story. However, the Bush narrative was not bound by such limitations. As described earlier, much of the power of Bush's narrative was derived from being able to structure Gore's inconsistencies into a meaningful framework. The Bush campaign possessed a story that was, to some degree, larger than the one Gore promoted. It was more encompassing because it subsumed the Gore rhetoric by

including it as a necessary part of the larger, moral narrative regarding credibility. The power to structure and integrate Gore's narrative inconsistencies into a frame that was favorable to Bush allowed his campaign to control other biographical aspects of Gore's story as well. Bush commanded the election dialogue regarding character from a position of narrative superiority based on the power he derived from interaction between the two narratives and the failure of both Gore's story and Gore as a narrator.

### Implications for Further Research

The election of 2000 provided ample evidence to demonstrate the usefulness of the narrative perspective when evaluating political campaigns. Critics should be vigilant in evaluating the narratives offered by candidates because such stories are never disinterested. They are, as Schram described, not innocuous, but potentially dangerous because they are strategically chosen to promote the interests of some over others (6). Furthermore, as Marjorie Randon Hershey demonstrated in her analysis of the 2000 election, narrative form is particularly attractive to the media. The media's effect on electoral politics is ever increasing and if Hershey's study is any indication, reporters rely heavily on narrative to frame their campaign coverage. Hershey found that: "When a particular frame becomes the story of the campaign, it can turn into a 'self-reinforcing plot that shapes perception of the race.' Readers and viewers can interpret new information in relation to this plot" (48). Media critics such as Hershey, Jamieson, and Kurtz continue to demonstrate the appearance of these frames, but it is crucial to continue looking behind the frames to the identification and definition of the narratives supporting

these frames. The question of why some narrative frames are more effective and accepted by the public than others must also continue to be examined.

This is not to say that the narrative perspective is all knowing. In fact, Kirkwood described what this thesis argues is a severe limitation of utilizing narrative, particularly in a campaign perspective. Kirkwood held that because audiences choose between narratives based on how well stories match their experience, rhetors have little room to expand understanding. He wrote that the narrative perspective as described by Fisher is troubling because “it implies that ‘good stories’ cannot and perhaps should not exceed people’s values and beliefs, whether or not these are admirable or accurate” (“Narrative and Possibility” 30). Kirkwood did believe that stories could submit to multiple interpretations but found that people interpreted stories in light of their own preferred beliefs and did not expand their horizons to an awareness of “new” possibility (“Narrative and Possibility” 33). Further development in constructing a new narrative rhetoric of possibility as Kirkwood encouraged would be an important and valuable contribution to the field. Kirkwood started the ball in motion by suggesting that rhetoric encourage audiences to “examine possibilities which previously they did not imagine or think they could achieve” (“Narrative and Possibility 46). Critics and rhetors should continue to liberate narrative from the confines of conformity, particularly in addressing areas in the political context such as foreign policy, that may require innovative solutions beyond what we have currently been expected to believe.

Finally, it has not been the intention of this thesis to condemn the character of expert in the course of political campaigning. Defining a candidate’s character as an expert does inherently cause us to focus at least to some degree on the policy issues

surrounding the campaign. This demonstrates a significant advantage to resisting what Gronbeck described as the “narrativization of political campaigning” (343). Gronbeck used the term to illustrate his belief that “When the arguments of policy-testing are left on the cutting room floor in favor of moral pieties and immoral character assassination, elections fail to fulfill their prescribed purpose” (344). This thesis argued that Al Gore’s use of the narrative of expertise in the presidential election of 2000 did not rise to meet the demands of the situation in which it was employed. However, to continue to encourage campaigns to offer voters more than character dramas, narrative critics have particular responsibility to examine ways in which issue-oriented candidates can also define their character as moral and active. Al Gore’s most successful attempt at realizing an integration of his character as expert with a more moral dimension was his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. This rhetoric had the possibility to elevate his campaign because it combined his policy knowledge with a more human, moral responsibility to fight for policies that would help common, everyday people. Gore did not maintain this new image; however, critics and future candidates should look to this rhetoric as the vice president’s legacy.

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