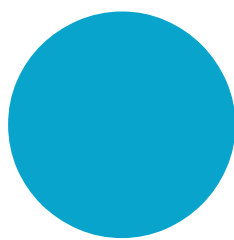


# *THE EFFECTS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN IN* **THE POLITICAL ARENA**



## **CLEAN NEW WORLD**

### *CULTURE POLITICS AND GRAPHIC DESIGN*

*Our culture is dominated by the visual. Yet most writing on design reflects a narrow preoccupation with products, biographies, and design influences. Maud Lavin approaches design from the broader field of visual culture criticism, asking challenging questions about about who really has a voice in the culture and what unseen influences affect the look of things designers produce. Lavin shows how design fits into larger questions of power, democracy, and communication. Many corporate clients instruct designers to convey order and clarity in order to give their companies the look of a clean new world. But since designers cannot clean up messy reality, Lavin shows, they often end up simply veiling it. • Lacking the power to influence the content of their commercial work, many designers work simultaneously on other, more fulfilling projects. Lavin is especially interested in the graphic designer's role in shaping cultural norms. She examines the anti-Nazi propaganda of John Heartfield, the modernist utopian design of Kurt Schwitters and the neue ring werbegestalter, the alternative images of women by studio ringl + pit, the activist work of such contemporary designers as Marlene McCarty and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and the Internet innovations of David Steuer and others. Throughout the book, Lavin asks how designers can expand the pleasure, democracy, and vitality of communication. • Lavin, Maud. "Clean New World Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design." The MIT Press. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.*

# DESIGN & POLITICAL PROTEST

Lately I get the feeling that when people hear the word “design” images of Don Draper-like ad-men plying clients with hard liquor, irresistible pitches and sheer animal magnetism come to their minds. But design can be used for more than just selling the latest product or service, it can be used as political commentary or, as the title of Milton Glaser’s book so eloquently terms it, “The Design of Dissent.” From El Lissitzky’s 1919 poster, “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge” depicting the Russian Civil War to Gerald Holtom’s 1958 Peace symbol advocating nuclear disarmament, design has played an integral role in political discourse covering the spectrum from propaganda to protest. The categorization of each depending on which side of the conversation one happens to be on. • One inspiring example on exhibit for the first time in the United States is Jerzy Janiszewski’s rare poster of his logo for Solidarity, the Polish anticommunist movement started by Gdansk Shipyard workers in 1980 that would eventually spread throughout the Eastern Bloc nations and contribute to ending the Cold War. The logo, executed in a bold graffiti style powerfully captures the revolutionary sentiment of the movement and is just one of a larger collection of Janiszewski’s works that will be on display. • Previously, as reported by Polish News, the poster had been “buried underground for seven years to safeguard it from Poland’s secret police.” A fact which further highlights the political tensions of the time. • Another example in the news is street artist and designer Shepard Fairey’s illustration of the ‘Protester’ for Time Magazine’s 2011 “Person of the Year” issue. Fairey, who was sued for copyright infringement by the Associated Press for using an AP photograph as the basis for the “HOPE” Obama poster is garnering accolades and criticism alike throughout the blogosphere for this recent work. Intended to embody the spirit of protests around the world from Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street movement, the ‘Protester’ depicts a close up shot of an anonymous individual with a scarf covering the lower portion of their face staring defiantly at the viewer. While HuffPost Arts exclaimed “The brilliance of Fairey’s image...” Columnist Christopher Knight panned it in the LA Times as “schmaltzy,” “corporate” and “conventional.” Aside from critiques directed at the image itself there are other interesting facets of the Fairey criticism. One, is that the Protester image is too close to the photograph Fairey based it on by Ted Soliqui and another asserting that he’s lost his guerilla art roots. • Regardless, both Janiszewski’s and Fairey’s work are worth contemplation for the dialogue they elicit, their impact on design history, and the way they shape mainstream thought on design. • Spiegel-Gotsch, Nicole. “Design and Political Protest.” Welcome to Graphic Design. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.

## THE ‘O’ IN OBAMA

At the end of

2006, Mode,

a motion

design studio

in Chicago,

approached

Sol Sender,

a graphic

designer, to

create a logo

for Barack

Obama’s

presidential

campaign.

The resulting

“O” became one

of the most

recognizable

political logos

in recent

history. I

spoke with Mr.

Sender a few

days after the

election to

discuss the

evolution of his

design.

Steven Heller: How did you get the job of designing the Obama logo?

Sol Sender: We got the job through Mode. Steve Juras, a classmate of mine from graduate school is the creative director there. They have a long-standing relationship with AKP&D Message and Media, a campaign consulting firm led by David Axelrod and David Plouffe among others.

Have you done other political logos in the past?

No, we had not.

I have to ask, since many agencies that do political campaigns are simply “doing a job,” did you have strong feelings one way or the other for the Obama candidacy?

We were excited to work on the logo and energized by the prospect of Mr. Obama’s campaign. However, we didn’t pursue or develop the work because we were motivated exclusively by ideology. It was an opportunity to do breakthrough work at the right time in what’s become a predictable graphic landscape.

How many iterations did you go through before deciding on this “O”? Was it your first idea?

We actually presented 7 or 8 options in the first round, and the one that was ultimately chosen was among these. In terms of our internal process, though, I believe the logo, as we now know it, came out of a second round of design explorations. At any rate, it happened quite quickly, all things considered. The entire undertaking took less than two weeks.

How did David Axelrod, Mr. Obama’s chief strategist, respond to your initial presentation?

Mode handled that. My sense was that there was a lot of enthusiasm about the options we developed. I was part of a presentation with Mode and Mr. Axelrod to evaluate the final two or three options. There was a general sense that they were all good, but we felt strongly that the chosen logo was the most powerful one.

Did Barack Obama have any input into the symbol at all?

None that was directly communicated to us. I believe he looked at the final two or three options, but I wouldn’t be able to accurately portray his reaction.

What were you thinking when you conceived this idea?

When we received the assignment, we immediately read both of Senator Obama’s books. We were struck by the ideas of hope, change and a new perspective on red and blue (not red and blue states, but one country). There was also a strong sense, from the start, that his campaign represented something entirely new in American politics – “a new day,” so to speak.

Were you responsible or cognizant of how many variations and applications were possible when you first introduced the “O”?

Honestly, we initially saw the mark through the lens of our work on more traditional consumer or corporate identity systems, and were concerned about it being misused. In retrospect, I think that was a narrow viewpoint. But this anxiety came before the campaign built such a strong internal design team. • Various vendors needed to reproduce the mark on signs, banners, and they needed some rules. So our initial concern was compliance and consistency. Having said that, we did think it was a strong mark, strong marks have the potential for broad successful application and viral growth, and we were cognizant of its possibilities. We saw (and visualized as part of the creative process) buttons, billboards, ads, Web banners, T-shirts and hats. • We did not foresee the scope of the variations and the personal “ownership” that emerged, though. We handed the logo and design assets off to the campaign in the summer of 2007. From that point on, everything that you’ve seen was done by the campaign, including the “demographic” variations of the logo. They also evolved the typography to uppercase, incorporated Joe Biden’s name and added a white line around the mark.

Did you have any qualms about this symbol? Did you ever think it was too “branded” and “slick”?

We didn’t, though there were certainly instances where we sensed a need to be careful about its application. We never saw the candidate as being “branded,” in the sense of having an identity superficially imposed on the campaign. The identity was for the campaign, not just for the candidate. And to the degree that the campaign spoke to millions of people, it may have become a symbol for something broader – some have termed it a movement, a symbol of hope.

Do you think the “O” had any major contribution in this outcome?

The design development was singularly inspired by the candidate’s message. Like any mark, the meaning and impact really come from what people bring to it.

Now that Mr. Obama is President–elect Obama, do you see the “O” as having another or extended life?

Well, the “O” was the identity for the Obama ’08 campaign and the campaign is over. That doesn’t mean that the mark will be forgotten; I think the memorabilia from this campaign will have a long shelf life and will stand as a visible symbol of pride for people who supported the candidate and for those who see it as a representation of a watershed moment for our country. As far as having another life, I can’t say. Perhaps the 2012 campaign will hark back to it in some way. • Heller, Steven. “The “O” in Obama.” Campaign Stops. NY Times, 20 Nov. 2008. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.



# MILTON GLASER

## GRAPHIC DESIGN AND POLITICAL POWER

*Like most left-leaning New Yorkers, graphic designer Milton Glaser is worried about next week's Republican National Convention. It's not the threat of terrorism or the specter of Tom DeLay in our midst that concerns him: He worries that the two or three hundred thousand protesters drawn to the event without a proper venue will be a recipe for political disaster. • Offering an alternative to the scenario, he is organizing Light Up the Sky, an initiative calling for New Yorkers opposed to the Bush presidency to peacefully gather on the first day of the convention, wearing or carrying expressions of light. I spoke with Glaser—who also is the 2004 National Design Awards Lifetime Achievement winner—about his idea, the waning political power of graphic design, and the diabolical nature of political advertising.*

### How did the idea for "Light Up the Sky" develop?

What inspired it was the realization that the city was going to be transferred into the hands of the Bushies. And that the image of people confronting the police, being hit over the head, and taken away to jail would accrue to Bush's benefit. If demonstrations become violent, it will further convince people that New York is full of nuts and psychos. Yet the truth is there is no way to prevent people from expressing anger at the current political situation. So I thought there must be a benign way to do it. What if you did it as a kind of transparent effect that didn't require a permit? What if people simply wore light, or some expression of light, and then went out on the street? So that everyone who opposed the president carried light—suits of light, lanterns, candles, flashlights. And everyone who lived with windows facing the street turned on their lights, so that at two in the morning the city was ablaze. And everybody understood what that meant. My theory is that intelligence is simply an acknowledgment of what's in your own best interest, and in this case what's in our best interest is non confrontational, non-violent protest.

### What has been the response to this idea?

We're getting a lot of hits on our web site. This week, kids from the School of Visual Arts are going to put up posters around the city. We did this with the "I Love New York More Than Ever" poster following 9/11. We're hoping to get some media coverage, because the only way this works is if the media picks it up. I talked Air America into supporting the effort, having individuals talk about their vision of America at various points in

the city. So they're going to do that. But we don't know if this idea is going to coalesce. This is an unfunded project. So it becomes a question of how ideas enter into public consciousness when you don't have enormous organizational support to flog them.

### Do you think graphic design in general possesses the power to sway political opinion?

No. Most graphic design is in the service of business, whose agenda is not the same as service to the community. In most cases, designers are conveying other people's messages. Every once in a while, there's a degree of social consciousness among designers, but fundamentally they're talking to themselves. Often it doesn't go beyond that, because it's more about relieving themselves of tension than communicating to people in an effort to change their minds. That's a failure of design intelligence.

### Was it easier years ago to get unofficial ideas into the mainstream when the marketplace of ideas was less cluttered?

I think so. Look at how information comes out during the current campaign. If anybody comes out with a claim, it's immediately countered. So what happens is everything becomes undifferentiated. You get two simultaneous messages, and they cancel each other out. Whether they're true is not relevant. Truth is not a factor, persuasion is. And lying has become the Eden drink of this effort, because the American public has become so trained by advertising to buy things even when they know they're being lied to. When you see a commercial and know it isn't true, you'll still go

out and buy the product because the commercial is entertaining. On that basis, I think the presidential race has largely become a question of what personality seems more entertaining. Nothing else seems to matter very much.

### Do you remember a piece of graphic design that had a political impact?

I am sure that images have affected me, but it's hard for me to recall what they are. There are of course slogans that persist in the mind, like "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." But when you move from that kind of narrative into posters, you don't find too many that have the same affect. It seems TV commercials have that resonance—LBJ's mushroom cloud spot against Barry Goldwater or the first Bush's Willie Horton spot attacking Dukakis. Those are the images we remember, rather than static ones. The commercial is incredibly effective, because of its capacity to generate an emotional response. I watched this spot that the Bush people did about the Olympics—the fact that there are now two more free nations competing. It hooked right into the emotionalism and patriotic zeal of the event, and it was created to run right off the television coverage, sort of partaking in that world of accomplishment and optimism and patriotism. And even though you knew it was bullshit, your heart swelled anyway. One of the terrible things about this is that you're emotionally susceptible to it, even when you know it's a lie, because the endless repetition ultimately becomes effective. You respond to it, even though you don't really know what you're responding to.

### So the two-dimensional sign or poster can't, by its very nature, compete with the 30-second political spot?

I don't think so. But I don't have any idea what part of the design community is politically active. My presumption has always been that they're more likely to be on the left than the right. But I don't know if that's true anymore. The world has changed. Young people have different motivations for going into the field. The only reason I see graphic design as being of a more liberal persuasion is its relationship to art. But if you think of yourself in the design profession as a businessman, you don't have that association and might not be inclined to feel that you're on the left side of most political issues. • Pederson, Martin C. "Milton Glaser: Graphic Design and Political Power."MetropolisMag.com. Metropolis Magazine, 25 Aug. 2004. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN EXHIBITION SPARKS

# Dialogue and Debate

A new gallery exhibition at Northeastern has sparked debate and discussion over the role of graphic design in political discourse in the President Obama era. "We the Designers," curated by Professor Thomas Starr in the College of Arts, Media and Design, features work by graphic designers that examines political issues during Obama's presidency. "Obama's election seemed like a turning point in our history, a period of high hopes and then a roller coaster ride of both disappointments and achievements," Starr said. "And if design played such a major part in his election, I

wanted to look at what part it is playing now." Part of Starr's inspiration for the show, he explained, was the iconic "Hope" poster by Shepard Fairey, which quickly became synonymous with President Barack Obama's 2008 run for office. The works in the exhibition, many of which were created specifically for the show, address such issues as the symbolism that surrounds Obama, and the policies enacted or pursued by his administration. Among the most debated pieces of art in the show is an installation by Starr called "Exploded View," which displays two flags, one without the American flag's

red stripes and the other without the blue box and white stars. Starr said the work is intended to show that partisan divisions between Democrats and Republicans — represented by blue and red on political maps — have stymied national progress. The work was stolen last week but has since been returned; it will soon be reinstalled in International Village. "We can't be this red team and this blue team. It isn't the Red Sox and the Yankees," Starr said. "We think of red states and blue states so

often, but to get anything done, we have to do it as one country." But some students have taken offense to the work, with more than 100 joining a Facebook page calling for the removal of "Exploded View." Others, though, voiced their support of Starr's work on the page, which has since been removed. "It offends me as an American, to be honest with you," said Patrick O'Neil, a sophomore finance major who carried a small American flag with him to the gallery opening last Wednesday night. "The flag is

a very important symbol for the values it represents and stands for. To see it violated in this way offends me." Others students and visitors to the gallery, however, said they did not feel offended by the work, which they saw as thought provoking. Graphic design senior Christi Gallagher said she liked seeing how visual artists and designers conveyed a message or information through their artwork. "It's really rare to put graphic design in a museum or gallery, so I think this is a really great

show," said Lucinda Hitchcock, a professor at the Rhode Island School of Design whose own work, a series of three posters entitled "Making Black" was displayed in Starr's exhibition. "When graphic design intends to make a message, you have to be careful," Hitch-cock said. "You're still in the realm of the quick-read, the way people consume advertising or other media." • Collette, Matt. "Graphic Design Exhibition Sparks Dialogue and Debate."Northeastern.edu. Northeastern University, 11 Oct. 2011. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.



## DESIGNING DEMOCRACY:

## HOW MYANMAR'S POLITICAL PARTIES (FINALLY) CREATED UNIQUE BRANDS

In 2008, President Obama's campaign revolutionized the role of graphic design in American politics. Using a contemporary typeface and bold logo, Obama's campaign presented an cohesive brand that struck a bold contrast with his opponent's traditional typefaces and visuals. • The same lesson about the importance of unique branding was made clear the hard way in the years leading up to last week's parliamentary elections in Myanmar, where political parties traded accusations of copying each others' logos. Because the country was under military rule for the past 50 years, the election was only its third since 1962. And with such a sparse political history to draw from, parties chose to use symbols that would be instantly recognizable to residents who weren't familiar with the electoral process. While politicians hoped that approach would them develop loyal followings, it backfired when many of the parties chose extremely similar symbols. Factor in that 9 out of 17 parties include a form of the word "democracy" in their name, and the result was a political mess. • The symbol that caused the most confusion during the campaign season was the kha mauk, a traditional Burmese farmer's hat. Typically made of bamboo and formed into a conical shape, the kha mauk became the symbol of the National League for Democracy, the opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, in 1990,. Despite winning a landslide victory, Suu Kyi's party was denied power by the military government. By the time the party geared up for this year's election, some members of the NLD had broken off to form the National Democratic Force, who also chose the kha mauk as their symbol. • Ohn Kyaing, an executive member of the NLD, told reporters the NDF was wrong to use the same symbol because the kha mauk is essential to the identity of his party. "A kha mauk is a kha mauk, and it was the recognized logo of the NLD in the last election," he said. "The kha mauk is the symbol of the NLD's 1990 victory, and it is also the symbol of the people's victory." The kha mauk

has come to represent defiance against the ruling military, and the hats are regularly worn by young activists when protesting. • In 2010, the NLD filed a formal complaint to the election commission, hoping to block the NDF from using the kha mauk. The NDF was allowed to keep the symbol, an NDF leader admitted that voters might be confused in the upcoming election. Adding to the chaos, the New National Democracy Party's symbol includes three bamboo hats. • After the commission allowed the NDF to continue using a kha mauk, the NLD chose to change its own symbol, trading the hat for a symbol of a golden, fighting peacock. While the image of a peacock displaying its feathers has long represented the country, an aggressive version of the showy bird was used by student protestors, whose rallies were brutally squelched by the military, resulting in the death of 3,000 people. "We used this image to acknowledge the struggle of the students," said Win Htein, a senior member of the NLD. • The confusion doesn't stop there; the Mon National Democratic Party also uses a gold bird as its symbol that looks very similar to the NLD's fighting peacock. The symbol is actually a hamsa, a mythological, goose-like bird that has appeared on past renditions of the country's flag. • Aung San Suu Kyi may have led the NLD to victory, but not without the headache of defining a political identity for an inexperienced electorate. Politicians are right to reach out to their constituents by employing symbols that speak to the country's heritage, but extra care and creativity goes into differentiating one political party from another. As Myanmar witnesses the greatest change in its modern history, its political parties will eventually gain more experience and better-defined identities, taking an eager electorate with them. • Ellison, Chappell. "Designing Democracy: How Myanmar's Political Parties (Finally) Created Unique Brands." Good.is. Good Design, 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama's choice of Gotham, an elegant 21st century font, for his campaign signage was praised by graphic designers for its modernity and implicit message of change. Critics derided John McCain's font, Optima, which was developed in the 1950s, and recalled the printing on a remedy for gastric distress. • This year, though, Democratic and Republican candidates alike have chosen fonts that look like they were banged out on a vintage typewriter or carved into an ancient temple. • "Because Obama's presidency seems to many to not have lived up to its promise of a different, progressive way of doing things, people have perhaps pulled away from his font," said Robert Arnow, a font designer in San Francisco. "For the most part, the fonts chosen by candidates do not take chances, but rather tend toward what's been done in the past." • He cites Ken Buck, the Republican Senate candidate from Colorado. With its fat, blocky lettering and the "c" from the Colorado state flag, the Miller font chosen for Buck's campaign seems "deliberately

## POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS ARE BEING STUDIED,

## FONT BY FONT

folksy and unsophisticated," Arnow said. Also causing graphic designers some angst is the conservative, Reagan-era Rotis font chosen by Sen. Barbara Boxer, the incumbent California Democrat, with the "x" inside a box. "I guess it's supposed to be like you are going to cast your vote with an 'x,' but it seems like a check mark would be more appropriate," said Sam Berlow, a graphic designer and general manager of the Font Bureau in Boston. • The use of older-looking fonts with jejune flourishes may reflect the influence of the Tea Party, which tends to favor signage that, if not homemade, looks like it might have been. "Fonts which look like old printing, stencils or even handwriting are popular with the Tea Party and grass-roots candidates," said Dave Nalle, a font designer and political consultant in Austin, Texas Sharron Angle, the Tea Party-backed Republican senatorial candidate in Nevada, mixes what looks like a handwritten font and a traditional looking serif font on her campaign signs and literature. Moreover, her name is printed at an angle. "Is she trying to say Nevada has a 45-degree angle

at its border with California?" Berlow said. • The campaign signs for Dino Rossi, the Republican senatorial candidate in Washington state, use a font that looks as if it were possibly first carved in stone during the Roman Empire, but he makes a graphical nod to the Tea Party on his website by incorporating a font that looks like uneven stenciling to emphasize his anti-establishment positions. • Regardless of whether the race is for the Senate, House of Representatives, governor or the school board, font experts said they've noticed a general conservatism in font choices and a crudeness in overall design that don't reflect the sophistication in branding pervasive in American culture: the distinctive lettering on Apple and Nike products. "I think poor design contributes to a general disinterest in politics, especially among younger people," Arnow said. "And I think it reflects the degree to which our politicians are out of touch." • Murphy, Kate. "Political Campaigns Are Being Studied, Font by Font." HoumaToday.com. New York Times News Service, 1 Nov. 2010. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.

## WHY THE OBAMA "BRAND" IS WORKING an interview with graphic designer and critic, Michael Bierut:

### What are the elements of the Obama brand?

To start, he has this way of writing Obama in upper and lowercase in a serif font and juxtaposing it with that "O" symbol he has, the blue ring with red and white stripes disappearing into it, making the white form inside the blue look like what I suppose is meant to be a rising sun.

### That's his "logo," right?

Right. A lot of times when he's at a podium what you'll see is, centered right beneath him, at the very top of the blue field that usually says something like "Change You Can Believe In," it'll be just that little symbol, functioning in the same way the Nike swoosh does. People look at that and know what it means, even though it's just an "O" with some stripes in it.

### How is Obama's design different than what has come before, or what rival campaigns are doing?

He's the first candidate, actually, who's had a coherent, top-to-bottom, 360-degree system at work. Whereas, I think it's more common for politicians to have a bumper-sticker symbol that they just stick on everything and hope that that will carry the day. The thing that sort of flabbergasts me as

a professional graphic designer is that, somewhere along the way, they decided that all their graphics would basically be done in the same typeface, which is this typeface called Gotham. If you look at one of his rallies, every single non-handmade sign is in that font. Every single one of them. And they're all perfectly spaced and perfectly arranged. Trust me. I've done graphics for events, and I know what it takes to have rally after rally without someone saying, "Oh, we ran out of signs, let's do a batch in Arial." It just doesn't seem to happen. There's an absolute level of control that I have trouble achieving with my corporate clients.

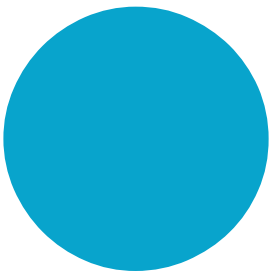
### What do you see as the "philosophical implications," to use a highfalutin phrase, of Obama's design choices?

There are a couple of levels. There's the close-in parlor game you can play about what all these typefaces actually mean. Gotham was a typeface designed originally for GQ magazine, so it's a sleek, purposefully not fancy, very straightforward, plainspoken font, but done with a great deal of elegance and taste--and drawn from very American sources, by the way. Unlike other sans serif typefaces, it's not German, it's not French, it's not Swiss. It's very American. The serif font that he often uses to write Obama is

delicate and nuanced and almost, not feminine exactly, but it's very literary-looking. It looks very conversational and pleasant, as opposed to strident and yelling. It's a persuasive-looking font, I would say. But that's putting these things on couches and pretending they have personalities.

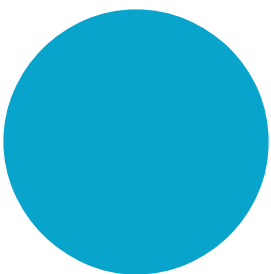
### Do you think there's a risk that such a strong reliance on branding and design encourages the perception that Obama is all style and no substance?

There's always that risk, particularly in America, the suspicion that if something looks good, it can't possibly work. If someone's really beautiful, they can't be smart. I don't know why. It's like, in Italy, they don't seem to have that problem, oddly enough. A lot of that had to do with the fact that good-looking, well-designed stuff used to cost a lot, it used to be a class divider. But now, with the brands you were mentioning, with Target, with Apple, they've become much more democratic and egalitarian in terms of access. Certainly, he's been attacked for being good-looking with no substance. But that's what you would do if you were losing to this guy. • Romano, Andrew. "Expertinent: Why the Obama "Brand" Is Working." The Daily Beast. Newsweek/Daily Beast, 27 Feb. 2008. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.



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