Michele Poff
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An Inconvenient Truth: Red, blue, and green

I began my PhD studies at University of Washington in Autumn 2006. For a class project my first quarter, I selected the book *An Inconvenient Truth* for analysis in my Rhetorical Criticism class. The book and film of the same name came out in May 2006. I purchased and read the book in June. In October I went to see Al Gore's live presentation at Seattle Center. From its release, I observed the escalation of popularity in the film. In February 2007 I watched the film win an Academy Award. A few months later I observed Gore being nominated for a Nobel Prize, which of course he went on to win in October 2007. As the film gained in popularity and catapulted a previously failed and all-but-forgotten ex-presidential candidate to Nobel Prize winner, I was awestruck at the power of the message. I had one question: *How did he do that?*

Seeking answers to that question led me into the Political Science department where I learned about some concepts that began to help me make sense of the film's contents that perhaps helped explain its success. These concepts are the core of the conservative worldview, and include representations of traditionalism and maintaining the status quo in the film. These manifest in the film with reinforcements of traditional gender roles, the hegemonic social order with whites at the top of that social order, and religious and Christian references.

These ideals operate within audiences through a combining the concepts of *identification* from the field of rhetoric, with *values* originating in the field of psychology, and *conservatism* as a worldview and *issue ownership* as a partisaned positioning of environmental issues, both from political science. Working together, these concepts help explain the overwhelming success of the film because through the verbal text and visual images in the film, these ideals are reified and reinforced. This constructs a familiar frame through which conservative audiences can view the issue of environmentalism, and therefore engender message attendance. These concepts are elaborated upon below.

Conceptual Framework

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1966) asserts that we "spontaneously, intuitively, even unconsciously persuade ourselves" (p. 301) because our personal values prompt us to identify ourselves with certain family, nations, political affiliations, and more. Burke defined identification (1955) thusly: "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he [A] may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (p. 20). Such identification can be implicit, as when a person becomes identified with the end of a process because that person is part of some other part of that process, or deliberate, as when politicians kiss babies, thus attempting to establish identification among members of disparate publics, yielding greater persuasive capacity. In political terms, Burke (1972) offered the example of "a politician who, though rich, tells humble constituents of his humble origins" (p. 28). Additional

examples might be a presidential candidate emphasizing a southern accent while campaigning in the U.S. South, or a politician purporting to adhere to values typically espoused by the opposing party in efforts to establish identification with an oppositional audience. Identification as a theoretical concept has been used often by scholars to explain persuasion both in political and corporate realms (e.g. Len-Rios, 2002; Livesey, 2002), suggesting it is a technique which pervades persuasive efforts in numerous settings. To understand how identification works in political and psychological terms, we can turn to the concept of values.

Values

Rokeach (1973) defined a value as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (p. 5). Individuals residing within a culture tend to draw upon a similar range of values, but in differing hierarchies or priorities (Rokeach, 1979). Further, values may be repositioned along an individual's value hierarchy in response to a persuasive message (Matlon, 1978). In their desire to win votes, politicians are in a position to appeal to as well as to seek to reprioritize an individual's values. A political candidate attempting to win votes may appeal both to values held by the majority of the audience and the salient beliefs of a narrow portion of the audience, and the gifted politician can successfully attend to these two very different aims (Gordon & Miller, 2004). Values appeals in political persuasion can take many forms: shared values between the speaker and audience, shared political party identifications between the speaker and audience, and/or "expectations about values traditionally associated with different political parties" (Nelson & Garst, 2005). These

values appeals are efforts by candidates to identify with particular audience members in order to gain their support.

Value appeals are often politically ambiguous because politicians rarely specify exactly what they mean by a value term, and as a result such messages can be especially useful when attempting to unify diverse groups (Hart, 1997; Sillars & Ganer, 1982) — a strategy useful to politicians attempting to win votes from diverse constituencies. As with any attempt at persuasion, in crafting their messaging political actors are guided by audience analyses of the values, beliefs and attitudes of those whom they wish to persuade. A fundamental strategy in political persuasion is linking a particular value to a particular issue, a process known as "value-framing." Framing, in general, involves "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993; see also Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996; Sapiro & Soss, 1999; Levin, 2005; Entman, 2006; Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2006; Cuklanz, 2007; Porto, 2007). In turn, when audiences receive issue information cast within a particular frame, they become more likely to interpret the issue in a similar way (e.g. Davis, 1995; Shah et al., 1996; Brewer, 2002; Gordon & Miller, 2004). Notably, frames resonate differently with different groups of people, and audience interpretations are based in part on previously held beliefs (Sapiro & Soss, 1999). That said, values laden with cultural lineages — that is, those deeply embedded in cultural histories — can prompt widely shared public interpretations among diverse groups of people.

Value appeals matter politically because individuals tend to support candidates and policies perceived as promoting their favorite values (Dawson, 1979; Feldman, 1982; Katz & Hass, 1988; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kinder, 1998; Nelson & Garst, 2005). In

the words of Nelson (2005), "values, like political parties, serve as important foundations for a citizen's political identity" (p. 490). Research suggests that political liberals tend to place greater weight on egalitarianism, social welfare, and change, and argue for social fairness and equality in diversity, whereas conservatives tend to strongly prize adherence to tradition and maintaining the status quo, and assert the importance of religion and morality, the nuclear family, and traditional sex roles (Wilson & Patterson, 1968; Wilson, 1973; McConahay & J.D. Hough, 1976; Altemeyer, 1981; Conover & Feldman, 1981; Hertel & Hughes, 1987; Altemeyer, 1988; Erikson, Luttbeg, & Tedin, 1988; Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, & Kendrick, 1991; Pratto, 1994; Altemeyer, 1996; Altemeyer, 1998; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Gordon & Miller, 2004). Congruent with these distinctly different mindsets, calling for environmental change aligns strongly with the liberal ideology while the conservative ideology, in its adherence to tradition and maintenance of the status quo, will logically reject such propositions outright.

Issue Ownership

Political candidates in the United States are members and representatives of political parties, and in this nation the Democratic and Republican parties are often perceived as holding opposing issue positions. Thus, even ideologically similar candidates will be deemed by voters to hold opposing positions because of the parties they represent (Conover & Feldman, 1989). With this in mind, Petrocik (1996) makes the case that each of the parties "owns" certain issues; in his logic, voters consistently perceive and assume differences in the ability of the respective political parties to "fix" specific social concerns (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003/2004; Benoit & Airne, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Holian, 2006; Kaplan, Park, & Ridout, 2006). As a result,

which issues are publicly salient at election moments becomes germane to electoral advantage; Democratic candidates are likely to fare better when Democratic-owned issues are publicly salient while Republican candidates will better succeed with the salience of Republican-owned issues. Of course, the salience of issues does not merely occur; candidates and parties work hard to bring their "owned" issues to the fore of public attention. In this process, public communications and the nature of values emphasized become crucial.

Issues that are perceived to be owned by the Democratic Party are those in line with liberal values — ones focusing on social welfare and domestic spending. In contrast, issues thought to be owned by the Republican Party are in tune with conservative morality and focus on traditional conceptions of social order (Petrocik et al., 2003/2004). Of particular relevance for this research is that the environment, as a political issue, is thought to be Democrat-owned. Following from this logic, if a political actor associated with the Democratic Party wishes to connect with and potentially persuade wide swaths of the American public, and not merely already congruent partisans, that actor must connect and present their "owned" issue through a set of values that are perceived to be more broadly constituted. For example, a liberal talking about the environment might emphasize religious and traditional precepts — which tend to be viewed as GOP-owned (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003/2004; Benoit & Airne, 2005; Hayes, 2005; Holian, 2006; Kaplan et al., 2006) — in making a case for "creation care," which indeed is a burgeoning conservative approach to environmentalism. A liberal doing so might risk some criticism from people already is his or her "political camp," but

someone of adequate status would be well-positioned to disregard any such criticism. Al Gore is such a person.

Analysis

Al Gore is known to the vast majority of Americans first and foremost as a politician, having spent much of his adult life in Congress or as vice-president; in all instances he was a member of the Democratic Party. Further, the last time he was substantially in the public eye was during the presidential contest of 2000, when he was the Democratic Party's presidential candidate. Thus, members of the public who self-identify with the Democratic Party or with the values typically associated with Democrats can relate to him — and thus are likely to be amenable to his viewpoints based on this alone. This dynamic is further enhanced by the reality that global warming, as part of a discourse about the environment, is an issue primarily owned by Democrats. Consider that in 2006 when the film was released, two-thirds of randomly sampled adults said Democrats could more effectively address the environment (Pew, 2006). With millions of Americans identifying as Democrats and with their affiliated values, Gore's central role in *An Inconvenient Truth* guaranteed a large and receptive audience — albeit one defined in heavily partisan terms. This is where *what* he said, not just who he was, became important.

Gore's and the environment's identification with the Democratic Party posed a significant challenge to reaching Republicans and conservatives, as well as those disgruntled with politics in general. To appeal to such individuals, Gore framed the matter as distinctly a-political — as an issue both outside politics and one that was crucial regardless of one's ideological leanings. These explicit attempts to frame the issue as a-

political take on further gravitas when we consider how Gore infused the film with reflections of conservative values. Indeed, Gore reached deeply into the value structure of American conservatives to highlight ideals that suggested his cause was not liberal, but rather was beyond politics, beyond ideology. He had to engage in this process with subtlety, however, lest he appear insincere. In this endeavor Gore turned to a pillar of conservative ideology and situated his message on a base of traditionalism. Traditionalism is a desire for things past and the way things used to be, embraced by conservative ideology. In a strategic balancing act, Gore presented his progressive message demanding immediate social change through visual and verbal frames of traditionalism. In particular, Gore resounded three specific traditional values: traditional sex roles in both the public and private domains, religious references of Christianity and morality, and hegemonic social order with whites in dominant social and intellectual positions. Each of these areas of traditionalism to which Gore appealed in *An Inconvenient Truth* will now be discussed in turn.

One way in which the value of traditionalism is manifest in *An Inconvenient Truth* is with traditional gender role depictions – both in society and within the family. These were present predominantly in the film's visual frames. Men were almost solely depicted in traditional men's roles and women in traditional women's roles. All of the professional and public figures that Gore cites are male – including Harvard scientist Roger Revelle, Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, Sir Winston Churchill, Carl Sagan, and his father, Al Gore, Sr. – and all scenes depicting Congress and Congressional discussions depicted men only, with the exception of the female court reporter (a traditional female position) in a photograph of early Congress. Further, there is a photograph of three

women looking puzzled at a piece of paper during the controversial 2000 presidential vote recount, implying that women cannot solve challenging problems. On its own this image may appear innocuous, except that it plays into and contributes to a paternalistic theme. In a similar vein is a story of Gore's sister, a victim of the tobacco industry. She is the only female to receive any sizable emphasis in the film, and Gore highlighted her position of weakness and vulnerability. Men-only images of Gore and his all-male classmates were depicted in a page from one of Gore's yearbooks at Harvard University, which admitted only men until 1973. And toward the end of the film Gore said that "we Americans" have the capability to end global warming because we ended slavery and gave women the right to vote. If "we" ended slavery, it was white men in government who ended it, and if "we" allowed women to vote it was men in government who did this. Even in a moment of seeming national solidarity, then, traditional gender roles was highlighted.

A traditional gender view also positions men as leaders of their families. Indeed, Gore described the farm on which he grew up as his *father's* farm, not that of his parents, thereby suggesting that men but not women are possessors and landowners. Further, he included images of men working hard within the domain of domestic life both on the land and as family breadwinner. These included photographs of Gore Sr. working on the farm, Gore Sr. rowing the boat while his family rode peacefully along, and Gore Jr. at work in Congress. All suggested men's traditional proprietary role within the family structure. Finally, traditional men's roles include not only physical and financial strength and stability but emotional fortitude as well, a trope that was manifest in the film in Gore's comforting of his wife and daughters – not the other way around – upon his losing

the 2000 election. In addition, there was no image of Gore comforting his son, further asserting women's need for comfort and men's inherent strength. Taken together, these images reproduced and reify a male-dominated family structure, with the man at the head of the family caring for his family in all ways, which aligns with traditional views on proper gender roles within the family.

A second area of significant traditional appeal was a reification of a traditional hegemonic social order, with whites in the leading social positions. This aspect manifests primarily in the film's visuals but is also subtly present in the authoritative sources Gore chooses to cite, and reinforces a worldview of white superiority. Simply put, whites dominate the screen in *An Inconvenient Truth*. Photographs of Congress depict only whites. All snapshots of Gore's days at Harvard depict only whites. The photograph shown of Gore's Harvard yearbook depicts an entire double-page of individual men's faces, only one of which is ambiguously nonwhite. Photographs of scientists are of whites or people layered in so much clothing as to be racially indistinguishable. The photograph referenced above of three women counting ballots in the 2000 election shows three white women. Any guests accompanying Gore on his various environmental site visits and car and helicopter trips are white. Additionally, all authoritative sources Gore verbally cites are white. These include: novelists Mark Twain and Upton Sinclair, British Prime Ministers Sir Winston Churchill and Tony Blair, Harvard professor Roger Revelle, scientists Karl Sagan, Lonnie Thompson, and Charles David Keeling, and artist Tom Van Sant. Even the cartoon clip of *The Simpsons* Gore uses to help explain the phenomenon of global warming depicts only white cartoon characters, and camera pans of the audience present for Gore's lecture which is the basis for this film depict only whites in

the audience. Additionally, Gore takes us to and through his family farm – a tobacco

plantation in Tennessee. It may be difficult for a viewer to see a tobacco plantation in the

south, which has been in the family for many years, without considering the racial history

of farming such land. In this film, knowledge and power come exclusively from whites.

This reinforces a worldview of whites dominating the social order.

       This is not to say that Gore avoids depictions of all nonwhites in the film.

However, the non-whites depicted further reinforce a worldview of whites at the top of a

hegemonic social order by showing nonwhites in positions of weakness. The urgent

voice of 2005 New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, an African-American, speaks through a

somewhat garbled radio transmission during and just after Hurricane Katrina hit New

Orleans. The urgency in his voice suggests fear and desperation while the static in the

audio track suggests lack of clarity in the source, both suggestions of lack of strength and

power. Images of China are also shown, which include a Chinese man and teen wading

in waist-deep dirty water, a Chinese baby floating in some sort of tub with two Chinese

men in chest-deep water beside it, Chinese children on a cracked, parched dirt roadway,

and crowded streets with factories billowing smoke. These images depict less-than

conditions of non-whites and permit whites to maintain a worldview of their own social

dominance. We are shown images of Gore's visit to China. These images include clips

of Gore giving his lecture to a Chinese audience aided by translation headsets, a meeting

with several Chinese men in suits speaking heavily accented English and depicting at

least one language comprehension difficulty in the discourse, and Gore being descended

upon by the Chinese press on leaving the building following his lecture. The translation

headsets, heavy accents and language comprehension difficulty all serve to suggest

linguistic inferiority by the Chinese, again reinforcing a worldview of white (and American) dominance. The images of Gore with the Chinese press do not suggest white dominance beyond the fact that they show Gore in the dominant position as the besought one; this can also be read as a token neutral interracial image, rendering it the only such image in the entire film. Beyond images of China, an additional photograph depicts dark-skinned people wading through a flooded area in the Pacific Islands, and another shows two non-white men plowing a field with a donkey. The latter image is juxtaposed by an image of a white man on a lush green field. These images again suggest the inferior social positions of non-whites who suffer greatly in less-than circumstances while whites, at the top of the social order, are worthy to enjoy the riches of nature. The images noted are the only images in the film depicting nonwhites.

Further evidence of traditionalism in *An Inconvenient Truth* came from Gore's regular invocation of religiosity and morality. Consider, for example, these words by Gore: he opened the film with an assertion that global warming is a "moral issue" and that neglecting to halt it is "deeply unethical." He later claimed that it is imperative that people do the "right thing" as opposed to going the "wrong way," called this moment a "moral decision" comparable to the abolition of slavery, and began his concluding comments with, "I believe this is a moral issue." In both opening and closing the film with language of morals and ethics, Gore book-ended the overall message within a framework of moral righteousness. All of these position this matter as a-political, as an issue that is not partisan but rather about right and wrong. Further, in using the word "moral" Gore adopted a favored terminology of U.S. conservatives, particularly religious

conservatives, who regularly characterize issues such as abortion and stem-cell research as "moral issues."

References to religiosity and morality were also present in the film, both in Gore's words and the accompanying visuals. The first occurrence was early in the film, after the introduction and in the first scene of Gore delivering his lecture. Gore stated that the picture "Moon Rise" – the first photograph of the earth taken from space – "was taken on Christmas Eve 1968." In this moment, Gore effectively transforms this scientific event into a religious one. Rather than simply stating that this first moon-from-space image was taken during the Apollo 8 mission, which would have caused it to remain within the realm of the scientific, Gore used the Christian reference "on Christmas Eve." Within this religious frame, the image takes on a distinct spiritual nuance because it is an image not attainable from earth's boundaries; it had to have been taken from beyond the planet. Colored by the religious language, the image takes on the suggestion of a heavenly body, captured on film by an unearthly being – from the vantage point of God. Moreover, that this image appears in this way so early in the film established a Christian base for the film. Audiences concerned that science and faith might be put at direct odds were put at ease right off the bat in the suggestion that the story about to be told is fundamentally congruent with Christianity.

Further peppering of Christian references occurred throughout. When discussing the devastation and death of Hurricane Katrina, Gore said, "How, in God's name, could that happen here." He later expressed confidence that there will come "a day of reckoning" for the planetary damage caused by humans. He labeled scientific and technological revolutions "a great blessing." And he claimed that global warming, if left

unchecked, would produce "catastrophes like a nature hike through the book of Revelations." This latter reference was visually bolstered with an image of automobiles in unnatural disarray, having been lifted, rolled, toppled, and oddly thrown together in seemingly weightless ways. The biblical reference suggests the scene could be created by a supernatural force, which, of course is implied to be a kind of God's judgment.

A final religious reference was perhaps the most subtle yet most resounding of all. It came in Gore's final sentences. He said of his early exposure to the dangers of global warming, "It's almost as if a window was open through which the future was very clearly visible. 'See that,' he says, 'see that? That's the future in which you are going to live your life.'" The "he says" invocation suggested a Providential intention and implied the hand of God in clarification of one's destiny, higher purpose, or God's will. In Christian or religious terms, Gore was hinting that he has received a vision and "calling" to do what he is doing. Such a presentation of this learning process forbore powerfully Christian beliefs and suggested reverential awe. The placement of this reference at the very end of the film both confirmed the film's overall message as a religious one, reiterating the Christian base established at the film's beginning with "Christmas Eve", and it left audiences to walk away from the film impacted by the gravity of Gore having received and revealed a provident vision. Together, these messages hinted strongly that Gore is a Christian person, called or at least encouraged by God to deliver God's plea for planetary healing. For religious audiences, these suggestions could not be more profound.

Conclusion

By presenting frames reflective of traditional conservative values, Gore accesses,

reflects, and reifies the conservative value structure, thus making his message palatable to

these audiences. No longer put off by the entire message because conservative

ideological lenses are reified and supported, conservative audiences can attune to the

arguments presented. In this way, Gore was able to guide conservative audiences past

ideological and partisan differences between them and himself, to a place of a well-

reasoned argument that resonated with these audiences if only because they message was

couched in their own ideological terms. By presenting identification cues that reinforce

diverse value structures, Gore was able to overcome message resistance by diverse

audiences and achieve message attendance. His message transcends ideology and

partisanship in this way

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