

When Debate ‘Zingers’ Backfired

Exclusive: Zingers are often the most memorable moments in presidential debates, but they are rarely spontaneous. In 1992, aides to President George H.W. Bush prepped him with insults intended to question Bill Clinton’s patriotism but the script went awry, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Mitt Romney’s debate team reportedly has armed the Republican presidential nominee with a list of “zingers” designed to deflate President Barack Obama in Wednesday’s first presidential debate, a tactic employed by other presidential candidates but one that hasn’t always worked.

For instance, while researching in the National Archives how President George H.W. Bush tried to exploit doubts about the patriotism of his 1992 opponent Bill Clinton, I found a list of “zingers” that had been prepared for Bush to use in their Oct. 11, 1992, debate.

The senior George Bush hoped to raise questions about Clinton’s youthful opposition to the Vietnam War, a student trip he took to Moscow while a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, and rumors that he had tried to renounce his U.S. citizenship. So, the day before the debate, Bush’s staff handed the President what he called “zingy” comments.

“It’s hard to visit foreign countries with a torn-up passport,” read one of the scripted lines. Another zinger read: “Contrary to what the Governor’s been saying, most young men his age did not try to duck the draft. A few did go to Canada. A couple went to England. Only one I know went to Russia.”

Bush also hoped to use the trip to Moscow as a double whammy, highlighting both Clinton’s supposed lack of patriotism and his shortage of foreign policy experience. “The Governor does have some foreign experience,” read one zinger. “We know he’s been to Moscow.”

Some of the “zingers” were both defensive and offensive. One was designed to counter a possible Clinton criticism about Bush’s official Texas residence at a Houston hotel. If Clinton raised that point, Bush was primed to hit back with another Russian reference: “Where is your legal residence, Little Rock or Leningrad.”

Another “zinger” highlighted a rumor that Clinton had considered seeking Swedish citizenship. The one-liner read: “That was the year he switched from waffles to meatballs,” apparently a reference to Swedish meatballs.

Other “zingers” zapped Clinton about his time in Great Britain on a Rhodes scholarship and his efforts to avoid the military draft. “During the war, Waldo played, ‘Where’s Bill?’,” President Bush was supposed to say.

A Counterattack

However, the “zinger” ambush was spoiled when Bush clumsily tried to impugn Clinton’s patriotism and encountered a strong counterattack. Early in the debate, Bush raised the loyalty issue in response to a question about character, but the incumbent’s message was lost in a cascade of inarticulate sentence fragments.

“I said something the other day where I was accused of being like Joe McCarthy because I question – I’ll put it this way, I think it’s wrong to demonstrate against your own country or organize demonstrations against your own country in foreign soil,” Bush said.

“I just think it’s wrong. I – that – maybe – they say, ‘well, it was a youthful indiscretion.’ I was 19 or 20 flying off an aircraft carrier and that shaped me to be commander in chief of the armed forces, and – I’m sorry but demonstrating – it’s not a question of patriotism, it’s a question of character and judgment.”

Clinton responded by confronting Bush directly. “You *have* questioned my patriotism,” the Democrat shot back. Clinton then unloaded his own zinger:

“When Joe McCarthy went around this country attacking people’s patriotism, he was wrong. He was wrong, and a senator from Connecticut stood up to him, named Prescott Bush. Your father was right to stand up to Joe McCarthy. You were wrong to attack my patriotism.”

Many observers rated Clinton’s negative comparison of Bush to his father as Bush’s worst moment in the debate. An unsettled Bush never regained the initiative. Thus, Bush’s “zingers” at least the four pages that I obtained from the National Archives went unused. So, the public never got to hear such clever comments as:

Bush in a direct question to Clinton: “Ever wake up in the middle of the night with Oxford flashbacks?”

Another: “At Oxford, the governor experienced pre-traumatic stress syndrome.”

Or: “Put it this way – Vietnam Vets don’t collect Bill Clinton trading cards.”

Read another: “I don’t know what you need more – a compass or a conscience.”

And still more zingers: “We’re not running for Dissenter-in-Chief [or]

(Quisling-in-Chief, Agitator-in-Chief, Conscientious Objector-in-Chief)."

"Mr. Clinton was going through a mid-war crisis."

"His motto was, '55, 40, and flight to England' [or] (Russia)."

Bush's script writers also advised that "if Clinton seems perplexed by [a] foreign affairs question," Bush should interject this put-down: "Now I know what to get you for Christmas – a world globe."

Another planned insult read: "If you ever go on 'Jeopardy,' don't choose the category, 'Foreign Heads of State'."

Still another: "The Governor's a little light on geography. He probably has trouble refolding a map of Arkansas."

One multi-purpose "zinger" was designed for either a debate exchange with Clinton about the draft or "if he hedges on any answer." This Bush one-liner went: "I'll bet you drive a Dodge."

'Campaign Mode'

Though the first President Bush is now viewed in a rose-colored haze, he was not always the beloved elder statesman that he is seen as today. His dark side surfaced most ominously during campaigns when he was in what he called "campaign mode." In both 1988 and 1992, George H.W. Bush unleashed his team of political attack dogs to savage the reputations of his adversaries.

The general election campaign against Michael Dukakis in 1988 stands as one of the nastiest in U.S. history, with Bush playing the race card by using Willie Horton, a black inmate who raped a white woman while he was on a Massachusetts prison furlough. Bush also questioned Dukakis's patriotism because of his ACLU membership.

Bush charted a similar course in 1992, with the goal of destroying Bill Clinton's reputation and winning re-election by political default. Documents from that time show that Bush was personally involved in a "silver bullet" strategy aimed at disqualifying Clinton with the voters by portraying the Democrat as disloyal to his country or even a pawn of Soviet bloc intelligence.

In a post-White House interview with federal prosecutors who examined possible criminal violations in Bush's 1992 campaign tactics, the 41st president acknowledged that he was "nagging" his aides to press ahead on a sensitive investigation into Clinton's student travels to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. Bush also expressed strong interest in rumors that Clinton had sought to renounce his U.S. citizenship.

Bush described himself as “indignant” that his aides failed to discover more about Clinton’s student activities. But Bush stopped short of taking responsibility for the subsequent searches of Clinton’s records at the State Department.

“Hypothetically speaking, President Bush advised that he would not have directed anyone to investigate the possibility that Clinton had renounced his citizenship because he would have relied on others to make this decision,” the FBI interview report read. “He [Bush] would have said something like, ‘Let’s get it out’ or ‘Hope the truth gets out’.”

The documents depicted Bush as raging, Nixon-like, about political enemies, demanding action and then counting on his subordinates to ignore some of his more outrageous ideas. When the subordinates didn’t and were caught pawing through Clinton’s passport records at the State Department, Bush coolly distanced himself from the fallout.

The Passportgate Affair

The so-called Passportgate controversy began in mid-September 1992, with Clinton leading in the polls and Bush’s brain trust pondering ways to exploit the Clinton “character” issue.

White House chief of staff James Baker heard about press inquiries seeking government records on Clinton’s anti-Vietnam War activities. Reporters from several news organizations, including the right-wing *Washington Times*, had filed Freedom of Information Act requests.

At the same time, rumors were floating around conservative circles that Clinton might have written a letter renouncing his citizenship during the war. Recognizing the damage these rumors could cause Clinton, Baker asked other administration officials about the status of the FOIA requests. Eventually, the high-level White House interest was communicated to State Department official Elizabeth Tamposi.

Tamposi, a Bush political appointee, saw the White House interest as a green light to speed up the search and override concerns that expedited action could violate Clinton’s privacy rights.

On the night of Sept. 30, 1992, Tamposi dispatched three aides to the federal records center in Suitland, Maryland. They searched Clinton’s passport file as well as his mother’s, presumably because they thought it might contain some references to Clinton.

The State Department team did not find the rumored renunciation letter. But Bush

aides did not give up the hunt. Tamposi contacted the U.S. embassies in London and Oslo and ordered searches of consular files in those countries. Only the London embassy complied and found nothing.

With little to show for their efforts, Bush officials next constructed a suspicion that a Clinton sympathizer might have tampered with the passport file and removed the supposed renunciation letter. They cited staple holes and a slight tear in the corner of Clinton's passport application to justify a criminal referral to the FBI.

The existence of the referral was then leaked to *Newsweek*, which published a story on Oct. 4, 1992, with precisely the disloyalty spin that the Bush campaign had wanted. The Bush campaign then seized on the *Newsweek* story as an opportunity to raise more suspicions about what Clinton was up to when he made a student trip to Moscow over New Year's Day 1970.

A KGB Smear

With these negative themes on the table, Clinton's loyalty became a hot campaign issue and Clinton's advisers nervously watched their poll numbers soften. The Bush camp upped the ante more, putting out new suspicions that Clinton might have been a KGB "agent of influence." *The Washington Times* headlined that allegation on Oct. 5, a story that attracted President Bush's personal interest.

"Now there are stories that Clinton may have gone to Moscow as [a] guest of the KGB, but who knows how that will play," Bush wrote in his diary on Oct. 5, 1992. The entry was typical of Bush's frequent complaint that the news media sympathized with Clinton's anti-war history and didn't hold the Democrat to account for his actions.

Yet sensing that the loyalty theme was undermining Clinton with the American people, Bush added his own fuel to the fire on CNN's "Larry King Live" on Oct. 7. Bush suggested anew that there was something sinister about a possible Clinton friend tampering with Clinton's passport file.

"Why in the world would anybody want to tamper with his files, you know, to support the man?" Bush wondered before a national TV audience. "I mean, I don't understand that. What would exonerate him – put it that way – in the files?"

The next day, in his diary, Bush ruminated suspiciously about Clinton's Moscow trip: "All kinds of rumors as to who his hosts were in Russia, something he can't remember anything about."

But the GOP attack on Clinton's loyalty prompted some Democrats to liken Bush to Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who built a political career on challenging people's

loyalties without offering proof.

On Oct. 9, the FBI complicated Bush's strategy further by rejecting the criminal referral. The FBI concluded that there was no evidence that anyone had removed anything from Clinton's passport file.

At that point, Bush backpedaled. "If he's told all there is to tell on Moscow, fine," Bush said on ABC's "Good Morning America." "I'm not suggesting that there's anything unpatriotic about that. A lot of people went to Moscow, and so that's the end of that one."

But the list of zingers, prepared on Oct. 10, indicated that Bush was not so ready to let the patriotism theme go. His problem, however, was that when he tried to raise the loyalty issue through a question on character, he stumbled badly and was then thrown way off balance by Clinton's counter-blow.

Through the campaign's final weeks, Bush shelved the Moscow zingers. But he did resort to other clumsy insults against Clinton and his running mate, Al Gore.

"Listen to Gov. Clinton and Ozone Man," Bush shouted at one campaign stop. "This guy [Gore] is so far off in the environmental extreme, we'll be up to our neck in owls and out of work for every American. This guy's crazy. He is way out, far out. Far out, man."

Bush added, "My dog Millie knows more about foreign affairs than these two bozos."

Although stung by the passport-ploy failure, the Bush campaign kept quietly pursuing derogatory information about Clinton's student travels. In the days after the debate, phone records revealed a flurry of calls from Bush's campaign headquarters to Czechoslovakia. There were also fax transmissions on Oct. 14 and 15.

On Oct. 16, what appears to have been a return call was placed from the U.S. Embassy in Prague to the office of Bush's ad man Sig Rogich, who was handling anti-Clinton themes for the campaign.

Following these exchanges, stories about Clinton's 1970 Prague trip began popping up in Czech newspapers. On Oct. 24, 1992, three Czech newspapers ran similar stories about Clinton's Czech hosts. The *Cesky Denik* story had an especially nasty headline: "Bill Was With Communists."

The Czech articles soon blew back to the United States. Reuters distributed a summary and, over three consecutive days, *The Washington Times* ran articles about Clinton's Czech trip. The Clinton campaign responded that Clinton had

entered Czechoslovakia under normal procedures for a student and stayed with the family of his Oxford friend.

Despite these last-minute efforts to revive the Clinton's loyalty issue, the Democrat held on to defeat Bush in a three-way race involving populist billionaire Ross Perot.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
