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The Role of Drama and Data in Political Decisions

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Almost three years after George Bush decisively defeated Democrat Michael Dukakis to become the president of the United States, a group of voters* in Pineville, Louisiana, was asked, “Can you tell me what you remember as being important in the 1988 presidential campaign?” The individuals in the group responded.

Hmm.
I'm trying to think.
1988?
*Leader: '88.
That's the last one.
Dukakis.
That was Dukakis.
It's about time for another one isn't it?
That time again. It was Dukakis wasn't it?
I just knew I couldn't vote for him.

*Members of my 1988 groups were selected to match the demographic profile of the state's or nation's most recent election. Individuals learn of the existence of the groups by reading recruitment notices in church and community center newsletters and on bulletin boards or by seeing ads in local newspapers. The 1988 groups met weekly from Labor Day through the week of the election. The groups in Louisiana met only once or twice. All members are registered voters. Because they are not drawn randomly from the population as whole, we cannot generalize from focus groups to the larger population. Yet these groups are a useful way of learning how voters process political information.
Attack Campaigning

Seems like the Democratic man that ran, he had a lot of problems. His wife and so forth.
A lot of that didn't come out till after the election, though.
That's right.
A lot of us didn’t know of her personal problems. They hid . . . that was pretty well hid. She admitted that was . . . I don’t know that was a . . .

I think the big thing against him was that, wasn't his criminal . . . I mean not his criminal record, but his . . . the handling of, um . . .
The handling of his state programs.
His state programs. I think that influenced a lot of people, how they voted.

And again, it was still a social aspect of dealing with social issues. And, uh, Bush was more international and people developing things for themselves. Giving them an opportunity to do their own thing and that will support our country. By that I mean build up business and the taxes then, and the income from growth and everything will take care of our country. I saw those as two distinct things.

Focus Group Leader: You had just mentioned how he handled state issues. Can you think of any specific issues?
Well, I think right off the . . . the one I’m thinking about was his . . .
his handling of a criminal, um, and I can’t right now . . .
What do you mean, a pardon of someone who has . . .
Willie Horton.
Yeah. A pardon.
Pardon.
Yeah. He pardoned that guy that went out and killed someone.
Afterwards. You know, he released this known . . . I guess he was a murderer wasn't he? Originally. And they released him anyway and he went out and killed . . .
Immediately and killed people again.
Right after getting out.
And this was brought out that he was releasing people really without seemingly too much thought. I think that had a lot to do with it.

William Horton and Michael Dukakis are now twinned in our memory. The fact that the memories are factually inaccurate does not diminish their power. Dukakis did not pardon Horton nor did the furloughed convict kill.

Although it does recount the facts of the Horton case, this chapter is not one more rehash of who did what to whom in the 1988 campaign. Instead, it sets a context for the book by examining how voters and reporters came to know what they know of politics. It argues that, in politics as in life, what is known is not necessarily what is believed, what is shown is not necessarily what is seen, and what is said is not necessarily what is heard. It then examines how in the Horton case consultants exploited the psychological quirks that characterize humans.

These quirks include a pack-ratlike tendency to gather up and interrelate information from various places, a disposition to weigh accessible
dramatic data more heavily than abstract statistical information, and a predilection for letting fears shape perception of what constitutes “fact.”

At the same time, we have conventionalized journalistic norms that reward messages that are dramatic, personal, concise, visual, and take the form of narrative. In 1988, the psychological dispositions of the public coupled with the news norms to produce an environment in which an atypical but dramatic personification of deep-seated fears would displace other issues and dominate the discourse of the campaign. That dramatic, visual, personalized narrative told the “story” of William Horton.

Voters Are Pack Rats

The role that ads, Bush rhetoric, news, and audience psychology played in transforming William Horton’s name for some into a symbol of the terrors of crime and for others of the exploitation of racist fears shows the powerful ways in which messages interact and the varying responses they evoke in individuals. Like pack rats, voters gather bits and pieces of political information and store them in a single place. Lost in the storage is a clear recall of where this or that “fact” came from. Information obtained from news mixes with that from ads, for example.

Although Bush had been telling the tale on the stump since June, in the second week in September 1988, the Horton story broke into prime time in the form of a National Security Political Action Committee (NSPAC) ad. The ad tied Michael Dukakis to a convicted murderer who had jumped furlough and gone on to rape a Maryland woman and assault her fiancé. The convict was black, the couple white.


When the Bush campaign’s “revolving door” ad began to air on October 5, viewers read Horton from the PAC ad into the furlough ad. This stark black-and-white Bush ad opened with bleak prison scenes. It
BUSH & DUKAKIS
ON CRIME

Supports
Death Penalty

Opposes
Death Penalty

Allowed Murderers
to Have Weekend
Passees

Willie Horton

Horton Received
10 Weekend Passes
From Prison

Kidnapping
Stabbing
Figure 1-1. This ad by a conservative PAC propelled pictures of William Horton into the news in 1988. Horton was the convicted murderer who committed a rape and assault while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison.

then cut to a procession of convicts circling through a revolving gate and marching toward the nation’s living rooms. By carefully juxtaposing words and pictures, the ad invited the false inference that 268 first-degree murderers were furloughed by Dukakis to rape and kidnap. As the bleak visuals appeared, the announcer said that Dukakis had vetoed the death penalty and given furloughs to “first-degree murderers not eligible for parole. While out, many committed other crimes like kidnapping and rape.”

The furlough ad contains three false statements and invites one illegitimate inference. The structure of the ad prompts listeners to hear “first-degree murderers not eligible for parole” as the antecedent referent for “many.” Many of whom committed crimes? First-degree murderers not eligible for parole. Many of whom went on to commit crimes like kidnapping and rape? First-degree murderers not eligible for parole.

But many unparoleable first-degree murderers did not escape. Of the 268 furloughed convicts who jumped furlough during Dukakis’s first two terms, only four had ever been convicted first-degree murderers not eligible for parole. Of those four not “many” but one went on to kidnap and rape. That one was William Horton. By flashing “268 escaped” on
the screen as the announcer speaks of “many first-degree murderers,” the ad invites the false inference that 268 murderers jumped furlough to rape and kidnap. Again, the single individual who fits this description is Horton. Finally, the actual number who were more than four hours late in returning from furlough during Dukakis’s two and a half terms was not 268 but 275. In Dukakis’s first two terms, 268 escapes were made by the 11,497 individuals who were given a total of 67,378 furloughs. In the ten-year period encompassing his two completed terms and the first two years of his third term (1987–88), 275 of 76,455 furloughs resulted in escape.

This figure of 275 in ten years compares with 269 who escaped in the three years in which the program was run by Dukakis’s Republican predecessor, who created the furlough program.¹

Still the battle of drama against data continued. After the Bush campaign’s furlough ad had been on the air for two and a half weeks, in the third week of October, PAC ads featuring the victims of Horton began airing. One showed the man whose fiancée had been raped by the furloughed Horton. “Mike Dukakis and Willie Horton changed our lives forever,” said Cliff Barnes, speaking in tight close-up. “He was serving a life term, without the possibility of a parole, when Governor Dukakis gave him a few days off. Horton broke into our home. For twelve hours, I was beaten, slashed, and terrorized. My wife, Angie, was brutally raped. When his liberal experiment failed, Dukakis simply looked away. He also
The Role of Drama and Data in Political Decisions

Figure 1.2. NSPAC sent this version of the “Horton” ad to cable stations in early September. It did not show Horton’s picture. Once this less controversial ad had been “cleared” to air, the more controversial version was sent by the PAC directly to the network’s “traffic” sections. Thus, the PAC avoided legal scrutiny of the ad’s controversial and unverifiable claim that Horton had stabbed his victim nineteen times.

vetoed the death penalty bill. Regardless of the election, we are worried people don’t know enough about Mike Dukakis."

The second ad was narrated by the sister of the teenager killed by Horton. “Governor Dukakis’s liberal furlough experiments failed. We are all victims. First, Dukakis let killers out of prison. He also vetoed the death penalty. Willie Horton stabbed my teenage brother nineteen times. Joey died. Horton was sentenced to life without parole, but Dukakis gave him a furlough. He never returned. Horton went on to rape and torture others. I worry that people here don’t know enough about Dukakis’s record.” The words that recur in the two ads are: “liberal,” “experiment,” “rape,” worry that “people don’t know enough about Dukakis,” “vetoed the death penalty.”

Taken together the ads created a coherent narrative. Dukakis furloughed Horton (PAC ads), just as he had furloughed 267 other escapees (Bush revolving door ad). Horton raped a woman and stabbed her fiancé (crime-quiz and victim PAC ads). Viewers could infer what must have happened to the victims of the other 267 escapees.
The narrative was reinforced by print and radio. The "get out of jail free courtesy of Dukakis" card reappeared in 400,000 fliers mailed by the Bush campaign to Texans. "He let convicted rapists, murderers and drug dealers out of prison on weekend passes," said the flier. "And even after—while out on furlough—they raped and tried to kill again."³

ALAMO PAC, a political action committee based in San Antonio, Texas, produced one ad that paralleled the claims of the furlough ad but focused on drugs. While showing a drug dealer at a high school, the ad noted that Dukakis had vetoed mandatory prison terms for convicted drug dealers, had fought the death penalty for drug "murderers," and supported weekend furloughs for drug convicts. A second ALAMO PAC ad showed a burglar, presumably freed under a furlough program, creeping into a darkened bedroom.

Clips from Bush's speeches that appeared in the news reinforced the Horton-Dukakis link. In Xenia, Ohio, in early October, Bush talked in what the New York Times described as "vivid detail . . . about the notorious case of Willie Horton." Press accounts vivified the case by supplying details and occasional pictures of Horton. The New York Times described Horton as "the murderer who left the Massachusetts prison system on a weekend furlough, only to be caught a year later after he raped a Maryland woman and brutally beat her fiancé."⁴ At a rally in Medina, Ohio, Bush referred to the Massachusetts governor as "the furlough king." In Trenton, New Jersey, Bush noted that "the victims of crime are given no furlough from their pain and suffering."⁵

The sister of one of Horton's victims and the man Horton had assaulted while on furlough began holding press conferences just as PAC ads featuring them were beginning to air. In Texas, newspapers devoted front-page space to Donna Fournier Cuomo, whose seventeen-year-old brother Horton supposedly killed, and Cliff Barnes, then the fiancé of the woman the escapee had raped. The press tours were underwritten by a two-million dollar fund raised by the Committee for the Presidency, the pro-Bush Political Action Committee⁶ that sponsored the "victim" ads.

In 1988, broadcast news stories allied segments from three ads to create new congeries of images. The ads included clips from the furlough ad, still photos of furloughed convict William Horton, close-ups of the sister of a man Horton "murdered," and the husband of a woman Horton raped. Horton's victims and the murdered teenager's sister recounted their stories. Since Robert McClure and Thomas Patterson's pioneering study of the relationship of ads and news, we have known that viewers import segments of one story into another,⁷ a phenomenon McClure and Patterson call "meltdown."

This phenomenon is well explained by former NBC president Robert Mulholland. "I think during the campaign the average viewer starts to
get a little confused. I’m expecting any day now to see Willie Horton endorse a line of jeans. . . . Some of the ads start to look like news stories, they’re the same length, 30 seconds. . . . Television is not just separated in the minds of the viewer between this is news, this is commercial, and this is entertainment. Sometimes it all gets fuzzed up because it all comes into the home through the same little piece of glass.”

The “melting down” of these images explains the controversy surrounding the Bush campaign’s use of William Horton. In late fall 1988 a rising chorus of Democrats condemned George Bush and his Republican handlers for the “Willie Horton” ad. Feigning cherubic innocence, Bush’s surrogates pointed out that no picture of the black murderer and rapist Horton had ever appeared in a Bush-sponsored ad.

From Bush strategist Lee Atwater to Bush media advisor Roger Ailes, Bush’s aides were telling the literal truth. The scowling convict’s mug shot appeared only in the ads of presumably independent political action committees. But the psychological impact was similar. In his stump speeches, Bush routinely raised the case of the furloughed convict without mentioning his race. But once a viewer had seen the PAC ad or a news clip about it, the images of Horton, his victims, and the circling convicts were likely to meld into a coherent narrative reinforced almost daily by Bush’s recounting of it in his campaign speeches.
Not All Information Is Created Equal

Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis both opposed the death penalty and favored furloughs. It is no accident that the image chosen by the Republicans to symbolize the Massachusetts furlough system was a black male. By explaining that they used Horton not because he was black but because he "slashed" a Maryland man and raped his fiancée, the Republicans tacitly acknowledged the atypicality of the case. No other furloughed first-degree murderer—white or black—either murdered or raped while out. During the primaries a double murderer did jump furlough but was caught and returned. As one of the authors of the Lawrence, Massachusetts Eagle-Tribune's series notes, the Bush campaign could have selected a white criminal had it wanted. "We did a page 1 story on a white murderer," recalls Sue Forrest. "He was a former cop who was furloughed. My colleagues wrote a story on five furlough cases. Four were white. The fifth was Horton." Former trooper Armand Therrien killed his business partner and a policeman. On December 11, 1987, he jumped work detail. A month later, he was recaptured. The Republicans opted for a street crime involving strangers and a black villain over the story of a white cop-gone-bad who killed a friend for insurance money. Since the Bush campaign relied on the Eagle-Tribune for its information on the furlough program, it presumably knew of these cases.

Horton was not a representative instance of the furlough program. Nor were his crimes typical of crime in the United States, where murder, assault, and nearly nine out of ten rapes are intraracial, not interracial.

Yet by late October, Bush was observing that the Horton case had "come to symbolize, and represent—accurately, I believe—the misguided outlook of my opponent when it comes to crime."9 In my judgment, a single aberrational incident was taken by the Republicans, the press, and the public to be typical of crime, and Dukakis's handling of it seen as symptomatic of the failures of liberalism because dramatic, personalized evidence carries more weight psychologically than do statistics. Moreover, the Horton case played both into the widely held presupposition that Democrats are "soft on crime" and into the conventions of network news.

News Norms Focus on Drama, Strategic Intent, and Effect

The Horton narrative fit the requirements of news. Unlike the "soft" news found in feature stories of the sort pioneered by Charles Kuralt on television, hard news is about an event that treats an issue of ongoing concern. Because violent crime is dramatic, conflict ridden, evokes intense emotions, disrupts the social order, threatens the community, and can be verified by such official sources as police, it is "newsworthy."10 If one believed Bush's version of the facts, a convicted murderer who should
have been executed had been furloughed to rape, torture, and murder again. In newscasts, the villain Horton appeared incarnated in a menacing mug shot. To personalize and dramatize, the news camera showed him in close-up; the less inflammatory visuals in the controversial PAC ad were shot mid-screen. Appearing in tight close-ups both in news and in the ads, the sister of the teenager Horton allegedly killed and the fiancé and now husband of the woman he raped told of their torment and urged a vote against the second villain in the story, Michael Dukakis.

The story structure of news lends itself to reporting that personalizes. A violent crime is committed by one individual against others. A good story has a protagonist and an antagonist, in this case a villain and a victim, the forces of disorder against the force of law. The "typical news story is organized dramatically to identify a problem, to describe it in a narrative of rising action, to locate the protagonists and set them against each other (usually in short interviews), and to create some sort of resolution. This format gives coherence to data, and it makes an item a story in the most literal sense, a story that is likely to gain and hold an audience." The Horton story offered to the news media by the Republicans met these criteria.

The first network story to air on the Horton case (CBS, December 2, 1987) uses interviews to set out the contours of what could have been a prime-time crime show. "The man who murdered my seventeen-year-old brother in 1974 was given a furlough," reports Donna Cuomo. "To think that these people deserve a second chance to get out there and we just have to hope that they're not going to do something to somebody else is—it's crazy." Cuomo is trying to get Massachusetts to ban such furloughs notes the reporter. What prompts her activity? Horton, whom she assumes was her brother's killer, was given a furlough. "He enjoyed, he enjoyed torturing people," says the husband of the woman raped by Horton. "There, there, all the begging and pleading really egged this guy on." Dukakis is quoted saying that after the Horton case, the state tightened its guidelines. But that's not good enough for the woman raped by the furloughed convict. Commenting on the claim that the Massachusetts furlough system has a 99.9 percent success rate, she says, "If 99.9 percent are proven good and there's 1% that's bad, then that tells me the system does not work. I'm a human being and my life has almost been destroyed, and I almost lost my life, not only my husband's life." There is someone who shares her view. "For the Maryland judge who sentenced Horton," says the correspondent, "a furlough or even a return to Massachusetts was unthinkable." "The man should never breathe a breath of free air again," says the circuit court judge. "He is devoid of conscience and he should die in prison."

As the news reports unfold the story, personal details give texture to the identities of the victim while Horton remains a menacing mug shot. "I don't think any of you can understand what it's like to be tied up in a basement and listen to your wife being violated and beaten," says Cliff
Barnes (CBS, July 20, 1988). "He's a big guy," says the rape victim (NBC, January 21, 1988); "He overpowered me and slugged me in the face with a gun and he knocked me to the ground and he tied me behind my back." "It was like a nightmare, you know, seeing this man after what he did to Joey is out on furlough and he is just free to go to a mall or whatever he pleases," says Donna Cuomo. And in the backdrop of the narrative is the law-and-order judge who finally locked Horton up for life. "I just don’t know anything about their [Massachusetts'] system. I have no assurance that he won’t be on furlough or parole or whatever the devil it is in the matter of two or three years" (NBC, January 21, 1988).

After April when Dukakis signs the bill outlawing furloughs for cases like Horton’s, the narrative runs into problems. The victims revive the storyline and hence news interest by asking for an apology from Dukakis. A Republican-sponsored national tour ensures that their request would attract coverage. "My wife and I have never heard from the Dukakis administration," says Barnes. "There's never been even an apology to us for what happened to us." "In Ohio," adds the correspondent, "Bush called on Dukakis to apologize to the victims for a program he called a tragic mistake" (ABC, November 7, 1988). "There has never been even an apology to what happened to us," says Barnes. "Whenever it’s been brought up it's been accused of being an aberration or one failure in a successful system, which is a blatant lie." Note that when Barnes asserts without evidence that theirs is not an isolated case, his claim goes unchallenged. Then Bush too joins the chorus faulting Dukakis for not apologizing. "As far as I know the Governor never acknowledged that his furlough program was a tragic mistake" (NBC, October 7, 1988). In the campaign’s final weeks, Barnes reappears in news decrying the Dukakis record in a synoptic ad. “For twelve hours I was beaten, slashed, and terrorized, and my wife Angie was brutally raped,” he says (NBC, October 28, 1988).

Into this narrative context, Bush fits one soundbite after another. “Willie Horton was in jail, found guilty by a jury of his peers for murdering a seventeen-year-old kid after torturing him.” (There is no direct evidence that Horton killed Fournier. Nor was there evidence of torture. But neither of those facts will be brought out in network news.) "What did the Democratic governor of Massachusetts think he was doing when he let convicted first-degree murderers out on weekend passes?” asked Bush. "In no other state would a cold-blooded murderer like Willie Horton have been set free to terrorize innocent people” (CBS, June 26, 1988).

Whenever a soundbite about Horton made its way into news, the requirement that reporters create a context evoked the whole Horton story. As a result, it was told and retold. “Dukakis accused the Bush campaign of exploiting the case of Willie Horton,” noted Chris Wallace, adding "the Massachusetts prisoner who brutalized a couple while on furlough" (NBC, October 19, 1988). “The literature,” which Dukakis is dismissing
as "garbage," says, "quote: 'All the murderers and rapists and drug pushers and child molesters in Massachusetts vote for Michael Dukakis,'" notes ABC's Sam Donaldson (October 19, 1988). "And it refers to Willie Horton, the Massachusetts prisoner who brutalized a Maryland couple while out on furlough. . . ." "The Bush campaign has scored big with TV ads on crime," says CBS's Bruce Morton, "especially on a Massachusetts furlough program under which murderer Willie Horton on furlough committed rape and assault" (October 21, 1988).

The vivid language in which reporters recounted the "Horton story" magnified its recall; by framing his rebuttal in statistics about the effectiveness of the furlough program, Dukakis used abstractions against tangible, visual, personalized threat. Because they prompt visualization and create conceptual hooks on which information can be hung, evocative words are more readily remembered than more abstract ones. The vivid, concrete nature of the words used to capsize Bush's charges coupled with memories of ads add visual points of reference to reporters' words.

This is the case, for example, when Brokaw says "The Vice President repeatedly has attacked Dukakis on the issue of the Massachusetts prison furlough program, specifically a convicted killer on furlough who brutally attacked a man and a woman. Some new perspective on that issue tonight. A study out today says that more than two hundred thousand furloughs were granted last year to fifty-three thousand prisoners in this country and that there were few problems. The study says that Massachusetts reported a furlough success rate of ninety-nine point nine percent" (NBC, October 12, 1988). Concrete language is more evocative than statistical abstractions. Exposed to Horton's face for weeks by the saturation-level PAC campaign, viewers now saw the convicts through the story of Horton.

In news and ads, the Dukakis campaign did as Brokaw had done—responded to evocative narrative with lifeless statistics. "The Dukakis campaign accused Bush of exploiting a tragedy," notes Lisa Myers. "A spokesman claimed the Governor has a tough anti-crime record, with more cops on the beat, five times as many drug offenders behind bars, and overall crime in Massachusetts down 13 percent" (NBC, October 7, 1988).

But the overall thrust of the coverage was uncovering strategic intent and effect. "If Willie Horton is a central issue in October of 1988," comments syndicated columnist Mark Shields, "then Michael Dukakis's chances of a mandate for 1989 are pretty limited" (CBS, July 20, 1988). "What if the big word at the end of October is not Willie Horton but drugs," asks Lesley Stahl of a Democratic consultant. "We win," he responds. "And so," she adds, "the Republicans will keep pushing the Horton line. Bush intends to keep up the pressure, which might even include a campaign commercial starring Willie Horton's victims." The power of the underlying story of violence and victimization is intensified as the piece closes. It is the victim who seems to be summarizing the story.
In the final weeks of the campaign, Dukakis gained some control over the Horton narrative when his campaign offered reporters a "strategy" peg explaining the Republicans' motivation. On the David Brinkley show, Dukakis's running mate alleged that the Republican use of Horton was racist. But here too the charge elicited recitations of the narrative. "Yesterday on ABC, Dukakis running mate Lloyd Bentsen said he thinks there is an element of racist appeal in Bush's continued citation of Willie Horton, now the star of news television ads. Horton, a black man, who raped a white woman while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison" (ABC, October 24, 1988). The Republicans "also denied any racial intent in TV spots about black murder convict Willie Horton, who raped a Maryland woman and stabbed her husband, both white, while on prison furlough from Massachusetts" (ABC, October 25, 1988).

The personal, dramatic, conflict-ridden nature of the Horton case eased it into network news in 1988. The process was abetted by the fact that it spoke to an ongoing news theme—crime—and could be communicated in telegraphic sound and sightbites. As NBC's Ken Bode explained, "Bush's tough talk on crime works because it fits what most Californians see on their news each day" (NBC, October 28, 1988).

Once Horton's case began to resonate with voters, its place in the news lineup was secure. The fact of Horton explained the perception that Bush was tough on crime, reasoned reporters. So, for example, after indicating that "Bush's aides say they would have used the Horton case even if he weren't black," Lisa Myers closes a story late in the campaign by observing, "A key part of Bush's strategy has been to drive up negative opinions of Dukakis, to cast him as a liberal. That strategy clearly has worked and senior Bush aides say that no matter how much Dukakis whines about it they aren't going to change now" (NBC, October 24, 1988).

Narrative and Strategy Sidetracked a Broader Discussion of Crime and Minimized Candidate Engagement

Press coverage in 1988 was driven by explanations of strategy; this focus doesn't lend itself to questions about the candidates' philosophies of justice. When differences on issues were noted by reporters, they were telegraphed not argued, the substance of the disagreement unexplored. So, for example, Lisa Myers explains the strategic but not substantive rationale for Bush's support for the death penalty. "Bush opposes furloughs for first-degree murderers, rapists, and drug dealers," says Lisa Myers, "and he is trying to make capital punishment a major campaign.
issue. Bush supports the death penalty for drug kingpins. Dukakis opposes it. The strategy is designed to shore up support for Bush among conservative Republicans and enhance his appeal to blue-collar Democrats who supported Reagan four years ago but now lean toward Dukakis.

Is Bush aware that blacks are more likely to be executed than whites convicted of the same crime? Does Dukakis hold that the death penalty is not a deterrent to other would-be criminals? Would Bush have executed those Dukakis furloughed, as the revolving door ad's juxtaposition of the two claims implies? Would he have executed Horton? That does appear to be the inference invited by such stump statements as "You remember the case of Willie Horton in the Reader's Digest, the guy was furloughed, murderer, hadn't served enough time for parole, and goes down to Maryland, and murders again, and Maryland won't even let him out to go back to Massachusetts, because they didn't want him to kill again. I don't believe in that kind of approach to criminals. He opposes the death penalty for every crime" (from speech rebroadcast on the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour," October 31, 1988).

Lost in the focus on strategy is encouragement for candidates to engage each other and the press on the substance of the issue positions they are taking. Had the stories focused on comparative stands on issues, the first question asked of Bush would have been, Where do you stand on furloughs? Or, to personalize the issue, reporters might have asked Bush whether he favored work-release for felons convicted of hit-and-run while drunk. When a reporter finally did ask whether Bush favored any furloughs, his campaign ducked the question. "Campaign officials declined to say whether George Bush favors any furloughs," noted ABC's Jon Martin on October 7. At a broader level, one might ask what exactly a president can do to cope with a problem over which governors and mayors but only rarely presidents have jurisdiction. And if there was some area of federal need, why hadn't the Reagan-Bush administration addressed it? Quietly after the election, the Bush administration did just that. In 1987, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons granted 4,610 furloughs, in 1991 only 3,190.

The belief of reporters that their job is "covering" the news, not "making" it, meant that unless one of the contenders found a visual, dramatic, concise way to refocus the "issue," the debate about Horton would not be transformed into a discussion of the causes and possible responses to crime or of the fairness of the criminal justice system.

At one point in the campaign Bush did try to move from a specific to a more general premise about their differences on crime. Dukakis believes, he said, that "all convicts can be rehabilitated," a view Bush thinks "is not just naive, it is dead wrong" (NBC, June 22, 1988). Had this been 1960 or 1980, reporters would have gone to Dukakis for a response and the issue would have been engaged.

In 1988 the "coverage" metaphor made that unlikely. Not until the
network interview with Peter Jennings (ABC, November 4, 1988) in the final week of the campaign did the public hear Dukakis’s position. “Of course” there are people who are so dangerous that they should not be furloughed, he responded. The fact that he banned furloughs for first-degree murderers the previous spring indicated that he had come around to that view.

The Democratic corollary of the Republican claim about rehabilitation is equal justice. What is intriguing about the fairness question is its bearing on the way the judicial system treated the creator of the revolving door furlough ad. After being convicted of drunken driving in a hit-and-run accident in 1985, the well-to-do, white admaker served in a work-release program and performed 250 hours of community service. It was the public service ads that Dennis Frankenberry created as part of his community service time that drew his work to the attention of the Republicans.

Police reports indicated that the Milwaukee ad executive hit a motorcycle carrying two young men head on. The accident left one of the cyclists critically injured. Instead of stopping, Frankenberry sped away in his foreign sports car. A witness who pursued him found him hiding behind a house.

The consequences of Frankenberry’s actions were serious. One of the cyclists required brain surgery and a lengthy hospitalization after the accident, the other, intensive rehabilitation. While his victims were recovering, Frankenberry checked himself into Hazelton, a private rehabilitation center, for a month.

Frankenberry was charged with intoxicated use of a motor vehicle causing great bodily harm and hit-and-run causing great bodily harm. After pleading no contest, he was convicted of two felonies and sentenced to ninety days in the county jail, which was served on work release, along with 250 hours of community service. He also was required to make restitution to the accident victims. An out-of-court settlement set that figure at $1.2 million.

After the sentencing, the adman’s working-class victims raised the issue of equal justice. “If it had been me,” said one of them, “I probably would have gotten a longer sentence than he would have had, because we’re no bigshots.”

If William Horton was shooting himself up with drugs in the getaway car, as one of the participants in the slaying of Joseph Fournier alleged, then one might argue that he was less involved in that killing than Frankenberry was in the hit-and-run. Both were apparently substance abusers. But while Horton received his first furlough after serving ten years in prison, Frankenberry was free to leave the House of Correction twelve hours a day, seven days a week for the ninety days he served. There are, of course, clear and important differences between the two, including a past criminal record for Horton; while outside the correctional institution, Frankenberry committed advertising, not kidnapping and rape.
Still, the contrast in treatment raises serious questions about equal justice under law unexplored in 1988. Had Frankenberry been poor and black or had Horton been well-to-do and white, would the treatment of either have changed? Should it have? That question is particularly germane in a campaign in which one candidate favors and the other opposes capital punishment. Evidence of differential treatment of blacks in sentencing has, after all, spawned much of the controversy over the death penalty.

Dramatic Atypical Instances Displace Other Issues

Reportorial focus on Horton drove coverage of other issues from the agenda. Instead of covering the Democrat's speech on agricultural policy on October 19, ABC's Sam Donaldson picked up the Republican theme of the day—Horton's "endorsement"—magnifying its power as he points out that the Republicans have set it tactically against Dukakis's record.

*Sam Donaldson:* "This was to have been a day with the Dukakis bus caravan winding through farm country when the candidate spotlighted his farm message. But neutralizing the crime issue is far more important to Dukakis's chances."

*Donaldson to Dukakis:* "Did you see in the paper that Willie Horton said if he could vote he would vote for you?"

*Dukakis:* "He can't vote, Sam."

*Donaldson:* "Willie Horton, because he's a convicted felon may himself not be able to vote, but it's fair to say he's rapidly becoming a symbol of something to voters, Dukakis's record or Bush's campaign tactics, soft on crime or dirty pool."

Lost in the report are Dukakis's proposals. The "symbol" of Horton has swayed the substance offered by the Democrat that day.

Focus groups reflected the powerful pull of the atypical Horton incident. In early November 1988, nine individuals in a focus group in Dallas were shown statistical evidence from the Massachusetts prison authorities documenting the overall success rate of the furlough program and the atypicality of the Horton case. The group members, who had started out in early September planning 5–4 to vote for Dukakis-Bentsen, were now firmly (7–2) in Bush's corner. The members were told that both the federal government and Reagan's California had furlough programs. Convicts had jumped furlough from both, explained the focus group leader, and had committed violent crimes including rape and murder. "Did any of this make any difference?" they were asked. Their answers resonate with allusions to reference groups, religion, and, sometimes unspoken, raw personal experience.

1: "You can't change my mind with all of that," said a sixty-two-year-old woman. "When you support the death penalty, the really bad ones get killed. That's, er, the liberal, the problem with, about liberals."
2: "They're soft on criminals. Not just blacks. Criminals. . . . It's a fact that Dukakis opposed the death penalty, vetoed it, I think. Wouldn't even use it for his own wife."

1: "The Republicans believe an eye for an eye; the Democrats turn the other cheek."

3: "Dukakis is, says he is a liberal now. On television. Finally. That's what this Horton thing is all about. Do you have any idea how often you are, er, someone is, murdered in Dallas?"

1: "We should ship all our criminals to the college liberals in College Station."

2: "Or Austin. Crime's not statistics, honey."

4: Dukakis supporter (thirty-seven-year-old male): "But Bush's guy killed a pregnant woman, a halfway house, a parole place. That's no different from Dukakis, Massachusetts."

1: "That's not his fault."

5: "If he knew about it, he would have done something."

2: "Look. It comes down to just one thing. If there is a murdererer or a rape, the Democrat is going to ask if the bastard has a lawyer to read him his rights, the Republican is going to give 'em the chair."

2: "A permanent furlough" (laughter; unintelligible)

6: "Or the gas chamber" (laughter; unintelligible)

3: "Or the rope."

7: "He'll die of old age first." (laughter)

2: "You know what a conservative is, don't you? A liberal . . . ."

7: (completes sentence) who's been mugged."

4: Dukakis supporter: "Suppose the guy is innocent?"

6: "We'll elect him to Congress!" (laughter)

2: "Send him to the ACLU."

8: "The American Commie Lovers Union" (laughter)

1 to 4 (jokingly): "You haven't been living in Dallas very long, have you? (laughter)

4: "All my natural life."

9: "And some of his unnatural life, too."

Throughout the substantive discussion, the second announced Dukakis supporter (no. 9), a twenty-two-year-old female college student, was uncharacteristically silent. In earlier weeks she had spoken enthusiastically about Dukakis's opposition to nuclear power and had brought the group a letter from an environmental group comparing the Democrat's record favorably to the Republican's. It was she who had argued forcefully that claims about Boston Harbor were "just a crock, that's all. Just B.S. from the man who tried to kill the Clean Water Act. He's [Bush's] a real fraud. He really is." On election day, she voted for Bentsen for Senator and an independent candidate for President.

"My family has always supported Lloyd Bentsen," she said the week after the election. "My parents voted for Dukakis and Bentsen and Bentsen again for Senate. I just assumed throughout the election that I'd vote for him for vice president and vote against Bush because of the environment and the recession. My brother lost his job two months ago. Things
just don't seem to be getting any better. A lot of empty buildings. . . . But I just couldn't bring myself to vote for Dukakis because of the poor judgment he showed over Willie Horton. I'm a liberal when it comes to the environment but not when it comes to crime. I would have voted for Lloyd Bentsen for president in a minute. But Dukakis? I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

William Horton has outweighed the personal experience of job loss by an immediate family member. Her membership in an environmental group had provided her with information to rebut Bush's claims about Boston Harbor, but she had no comparable source of information about furloughs. The information that was released by the Dukakis campaign took the form of statistical abstractions. A 99+ percent return rate for those furloughed in Massachusetts, said the factsheets. A much lower rate of return to a life of crime after final release of those furloughed, said the penologists. Horton was the atypical, nonrepresentative instance, said all the available data. In any furlough program in a large state (and most states had such programs) one could find one or two such cases.

But for those with any direct or secondhand experience with crime—a purse snatching, a car broken into, a mugging—Horton was not an aberration. Unspoken in her post-election interview is a fact mentioned in an earlier meeting of the focus group. A year and a half earlier, on her way home from a concert, the respondent had been robbed by an assailant whose race she did not identify to the group. Later, the focus group leader learned that the assailant was white. So crime may have had a special salience to this respondent as it did to respondent number 1 whose house had been burglarized five years before.

Nor was the response of this single all-white group in a Southern state atypical. The "damage" the claims about Horton did the Democrat was capsulized by "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" host Robert MacNeil. "On Friday night on our program, two women voters in Ohio told Judy Woodruff, 'I'm going to vote for George Bush because I can't vote for a man who lets murderers out of jail.' One was a black woman."18

Our Fears Shape Our Perception of "The Facts"

Helping propel the false generalizations from the isolated case of Horton to hordes of others who presumably did what he had done were complex and unspoken references to race. "'Crime' became a shorthand signal," note Thomas and Mary Edsall, "to a crucial group of white voters, for broader issues of social disorder, evoking powerful ideas about authority, status, morality, self-control, and race."19 "Any reference to capital punishment," argues political scientist Murray Edelman, "is also a reference to the need to restrain blacks and the poor from violence. The liberal argument that poor people and blacks are disproportionately
targeted by capital punishment laws doubtless fuels this fear in a part of the public. That the association is subtle makes it all the more potent, for "capital punishment," like all condensation symbols, draws its intensity from the associations it represses." Without actually voicing the repressed associations, the image of Horton on the screen as the announcer notes that Dukakis opposes the death penalty serves to raise them. " 'Weekend Passes' [which I have called the Horton ad] is not about Willie Horton," says NSPAC's Floyd Brown. "It's about the death penalty. George Bush stood on the side of the majority. Michael Dukakis stood on the side of the minority. The death penalty is where we win our audience."

The 1990 General Social Survey of Racial Stereotyping among White Americans demonstrates that racial prejudice correlates with support for capital punishment. According to Kinder and Mendelberg, "white Americans who regard blacks as inferior are quite a bit more likely to favor the death penalty for convicted murderers." In the last week of October 1988, ninety-three members of ten focus groups demonstrated the power of the Horton narrative to elicit racially based fear. "If you saw an ad on prison furloughs with scenes in a prison," these voters were asked, "remember as best you can" the "race or ethnic identity" of the "people you saw in the ad..." Of those who did recall the ad, nearly 60 percent (59.9 percent, 43 individuals) reported that most of the men were black. In fact, only two of the "prisoners" are identifiably black. One of them is the only one in the ad to ever look directly into the camera.

When asked to write out everything "you know about William Horton," all but five of the focus group respondents included the fact that Horton is black in their description. All but twelve wrote that the woman raped was white. One-third of the respondents indicated Horton's race twice in their descriptions. And one focus group respondent referred to Horton throughout his description as "this Black Man." Twenty-eight percent of those in the focus groups indicated that he had committed murder while on furlough.

The power of the narrative is indicated in the extent to which viewers embellished it. After completing their description, focus group members were asked to indicate the source of their information sentence by sentence. They were told to write NS to indicate that they weren't sure where they had heard/read/seen it, to indicate PN for print news, BN for broadcast news, RN for radio news, A for advertising, and H if they had heard it in conversation. Each sentence could be tagged with more than one letter.

A thirty-five-year-old, public-high-school-educated, white, ticket-splitting, self-identified "Independent" Dallas waitress, married with two children (who had twice voted for Reagan but reported leaning toward Dukakis after his selection of Bentsen) wrote:
“Willy Horton is a killer—black—supposed to be gassed or electrocuted when Dukakis was governor (BN/PN). But he [Dukakis] vetoed all death penalties (BN/PN). Willy Horton was a killer and wasn't electrocuted (H/PN). He and some other criminals were paroled [paroled is then crossed out and replaced by] furloughed on weekends and coming back [sic] he stole a car and went to Maryland (BN). He broke into a home, a married [sic] home—in a small town—Maryland—and then tied up the husband (BN). His wife kept screaming [but?] he couldn't help her (BN). Their children were at school (NS). He [Horton] stayed there for a whole afternoon (BN). He kept raping the wife (BN). He [Horton] was black and the wife [sic] was white. Even when she begged him because she might be [get?] pregnant. Her husband went crazy. He couldn't do anything because Horton had shot him and stabbed him (BN). He [husband] still can't forgive himself. That's why he is against Dukakis (BN). The husband (he was on television) got loose and called the police (BN). But Horton got away before the police came (BN). Her husband says that she is afraid that he will come back (BN/NS). He [Horton] killed a boy in a supermarket in Maryland (H). The police caught him (They must have. He's in jail). He is in solitary confinement (H). I believe in the death penalty for people like that. I saw the boy he killed [sic] mother on television (BN). She wishes she had shot him [Horton]—killed him—before he shot him [her son] (BN). George Bush opposes gun control and favors executing Hortons (Radio—I think it was an ad). I would guess Willy Horton doesn't.

Although this respondent reported that she had learned about Horton's victims on "the news," specifically broadcast news, their stories had not appeared on the station she reported watching. She probably pieced the information together by amalgamating clips from Bush's speeches with the crime quiz and victims ads.

The cues in the available media have triggered a broad chain of associations in this respondent. From them she has constructed her own text. Her text magnifies the culpability of Dukakis. In her construction Horton was reprieved from execution because Dukakis vetoed the death penalty.

She also magnifies the vulnerability of the victims beyond that expressed in the ads or news (e.g., Horton is there all afternoon; the children are at school; presumably if Horton stays longer, the children will come home; Angela Barnes remains afraid that Horton will return). She increases the number of crimes Horton has committed (he shot and stabbed the husband, she says) and shifts the murder of Joseph Fournier to after the furlough. A wish for power is attributed to Fournier's mother (actually his sister). The respondent says that the mother wishes she had shot Horton before he shot her "son" (Fournier was stabbed to death. Whether Horton was wielding the knife is unknown. Three individuals were convicted of being party to the crime.) And all of this connects to
the fact that George Bush opposes gun control. (Presumably gun control
would make it more difficult for Fournier's mother, and others like her,
to kill criminals such as Horton.) Finally Horton favors what Bush op-
poses. Bush is Horton's enemy. Indeed, he favors "executing Hortons."

Additionally, the Republican use of Horton suggests the power such a
story has to trigger more full-blown if inaccurate narratives and to har-
ness them in service of voting behavior. These instances show how vis-
ceral and visual readings that do not inhere explicitly can be read im-
plcitly in texts about out-groups.

The power of narrative may account for the claims of George Bush, Lee Atwater, and, more recently, the New York Times, that while on fur-
lough, Horton murdered again. The hypothesis comes to mind because it is difficult to believe that a candidate for president would deliberately
lie about something so easily checked by reporters and because on Feb-
ruary 24, 1992, an article without byline in the decidedly non-conservative New York Times, a paper that endorsed the Democratic nominee in 1988,
recalled, "The [Horton] advertisement suggested that Mr. Bush's Dem-
ocratic opponent, Gov. Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts was soft on
crime because a convicted murderer from the state was given a weekend
pass from prison and committed a second murder" (p. A15). The ad
made no such claim. Nor did the Times in its 1988 coverage of the ad or
of the Horton case.

Where one might attribute the Republican statements to calculated
deception, I am more inclined to explain them in a context created by the
memory reflected in the New York Times article. Murderer released
to murder breathes irony. It completes in a satisfying manner a narrative
that is already cast with a menacing murderer in mug shot; anguished, out-
raged victims; and an unrepentant, soft-on-crime liberal. In such a
narrative construction, the governor will be unmasked for what he is
because the murderer will murder again. Horton is incapable of re-
demption. Prison has accomplished nothing. He deserved the death
penalty Bush is touting.

Less satisfying, more troubling, and complex is a story of a young man
who may not have committed murder at all but is nonetheless jailed for
it for a decade, and after a handful of successful furloughs escapes to
assault and rape. In this second story, the initial act is shaded in ambi-
guity, the final act unparalleled by the first. William Horton, Michael
Dukakis, George Bush, Lee Atwater, and The New York Times may, in
other words, have fallen victim to our natural disposition to construct
compelling stories, whether or not they comport with the facts.

An October Harris poll found that 60 percent of those surveyed re-
membered the furlough ad. From the time that the ad started to the
time of the survey, the percent reporting that Dukakis was "soft on crime"
rose from 52 to 63 percent.

The fixation of reporters on strategy in 1988 meant that "coverage"
would focus on the effectiveness of the charges and countercharges and
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on their motivation (i.e., were they racist?), not on their accuracy or relevance to the role of president.

In the Horton Case, Reporters Offered Contradictory "Facts"

As Brookings scholar Stephen Hess found, reporters are generalists who use no documents in preparing nearly three-quarters of their stories. When documents are used, they are most often newspaper stories. The documents from which the Republicans drew the Horton narrative were an article in the July 1988 Reader's Digest titled "Getting Away with Murder" and a Pulitzer Prize-winning series in the stridently anti-Dukakis Eagle-Tribune. The Democrats believe but have been unable to prove that the Reader's Digest story was planted by Bush supporters. Behind the scenes, Republican operatives made these accounts available to reporters. The Eagle-Tribune embellished the Horton story asserting and then recanting such claims as one that the woman raped by Horton was pregnant at the time and he had cut off the genitals of the man killed in the hold-up that landed him in a Massachusetts prison.

Interviews are the staple of news reports. Reporters who have come to rely on "experts" to arbitrate contentions of fact lack experience in sorting through blizzards of competing claims. The result was Babel. CBS put the number of states with furlough programs as "all" (October 28, 1988), 45 (December 2, 1987), 40 (June 26, 1988), and 32 (July 20, 1988). On NBC, Tom Brokaw (January 21, 1988) indicated that "thirty-two states now permit first-degree murderers to spend short periods out of prison" but five months later his colleague Lisa Myers reports that "few [states] permit furloughs for first-degree murderers" (June 22, 1988). The same week, CBS's Jaqueline Adams claims that "Massachusetts was the only state to furlough first-degree murderers" (CBS, June 26, 1988). Kwame Holman of "MacNeil/Lehrer" puts the number of states furloughing first-degree murderers at 40. Throughout all this, Dukakis insisted that his state was within national norms.

Others using the category "life sentence" set the number of states permitting furloughs at 36 (Tolchin, New York Times; Martin, ABC, October 7, 1988), 33 (Cohen, Washington Post, July 8, 1988), or 25 (Contact Center, October 13, 1988). Without revealing how many states had the category "first-degree murder not eligible for parole," Cohen of the Post announces that Massachusetts alone fell into that category. Not so says the Contact Center (Atlanta Constitution, October 13, 1988). South Carolina still does furlough those in that category. Without indicating whether it could do so, the governor of South Carolina announced the next day that his state never had furloughed anyone serving a life sentence without parole (Hotline, October 14, 1988).

In the resulting confusion, the public received conflicting answers to the question, was the Massachusetts' program fundamentally similar to those in other states, including Reagan's California, and to the federal
government's or was this a bizarre, unique liberal experiment undertaken by the Democratic nominee? Nor did the public have a clear way of knowing whether the Massachusetts program was more or less successful than those elsewhere or whether the Horton case was isolated or representative of justice in Massachusetts under Dukakis.

In the Horton Case Reporters Accepted Assertion as Proof

Under attack for the unfairness of their ads, the Republicans in late October 1988 held a press conference. Former prosecutor and current Republican Senator Arlen Specter was given the task of defending the furlough ad. At the conference, Specter proved anything but an able defender. He said:

Now frankly I would focus on the furlough program if there were only one or two or three or a few errors, or a few instances where the furlough program had proved to be disastrous. But the fact is that the Massachusetts furlough program makes it a practice to furlough career criminals identified in their own materials. Convicts who have six or more adult incarcerations, convicts who have had four or more parole violations, it is a very, very different program.

Secondly, beyond the issue of its being unprincipled, I believe that it is a legitimate issue in this campaign because it bears directly on Governor Dukakis' judgment. Now, this is not a program, one of many, administered in a large governmental operation like the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This is a program where Governor Dukakis has personally had intimate contact, has seen the errors of the system, and then inflexibly has insisted on keeping the program in operation in the face of those demonstrated errors.

Q: Senator Specter, in that furlough ad, almost simultaneous with the announcer saying that the furlough program furloughed first-degree murderers, a graphic comes up that says, "268 escaped." Is it your understanding that 268 murderers escaped from furlough in Massachusetts?

Sen. Specter: No, it is not my understanding. The total 268 does not refer to the number of murderers; it refers to the total number of people who have, quote, "escaped" under the characterization of the Massachusetts authorities. That is—that is their term. I might say to you that I have been very interested to see the statistics for 1987. When this issue is as important as it is to this country, I think we're entitled to have the 1987 statistics on furloughs. The 1986 statistics were made available in August of 1987, and the 1985 statistics were made available in July of 1986. Now we don't have 1987 statistics. I don't think it's a matter for Massachusetts, and I don't think the Massachusetts government ought to be contorted to suit a campaign. I'd like to know how many more have escaped.

Q: Well, according to the statistics you know about, how many murderers did escape while on furlough?
Sen. Specter: I don't know.
Q: What about last—the last—
Sen. Specter: I don't know and—
Q (off mike): Four?
Sen. Specter: Well, if you read the statistics put out by the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, you can't tell a whole lot. Now, I've gone through it personally with a fine-toothed comb to try to identify the number of individuals, for example. They don't tell you how many individuals. They gave you the total number of furloughs. They do tell you how many have been convicted of six or more offenses, or how many have parole violations, but they do not particularize. My personal efforts to get details have been unsuccessful. One of the points made in the Lawrence article was the stonewalling by Governor Dukakis and his officials when those reporters tried to find out the facts. It's very hard to really get the details of that program.

Q: Senator, I experienced stonewalling from the Federal Bureau of Prisons when I asked about furloughs and they withheld totally details on transfer furloughs. Point number 9, here on page 3, says that Angel Medrano [the killer Dukakis is accusing Bush of releasing from the federal system] is not on furlough. Was he not on a transfer furlough, which is one of the furlough programs of the Federal Bureau of Prisons?

Sen. Specter: I don't know.
Q: Was he escorted at the time he escaped?
Sen. Specter: I don't know.
Q: Senator—
Sen. Specter: One, that is not my document. I would respond to you on the specifics, as I have, that I do not know that detail. But I would not cite a case or two cases or five cases as a major indictment of a program. I think a program rises or falls on its underlying philosophical approach in a correctional setting. What do you find to be wrong with it and what you do to correct it.

On the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" (October 24, 1988) Specter repeated his claim that "I do not criticize the Massachusetts furlough program because of one case. There can be a problem in one instance anywhere." There is only one problem with Specter's answer. Horton was the single instance in Dukakis's first two terms in which a first-degree murderer whose sentence had been downgraded—a process required if he were to be furloughed—had escaped to commit a violent crime. Specter has not responded to three letters and three phone calls asking him what evidence led him to conclude that there were more than five Horton-like cases during Dukakis's governorship.

What is unique about Specter's statement at that press conference is that under questioning from the press he is the only spokesperson for the Bush campaign who admitted that 268 first-degree murderers did not escape. That admission, however, did not filter into print press reports or broadcast news. Instead, the reporters present at the press conference accepted the "form" of proof—thick factsheets, one large chart, and three experts—as proof. "I remember feeling afterward," recalls Tom
Rosensteel who reported on the conference for the Los Angeles Times, "that it was a case of how easily manipulated we were. Our reports were not very discriminating. They [the Bush 'experts'] made an awful case. But what appeared in the next day's papers played into the advertiser's hands" (interview, October 4, 1991).

The Psychology of the Bush Use of Horton

Did the Horton case, while atypical and inflammatory, tell a larger psychological truth? Is it possible to lie—by claiming that Horton murdered on furlough when he did not, inviting false inferences about the number of Horton-like instances that had occurred in Massachusetts, and encouraging unwarranted fears about blacks raping and murdering whites—and still tell a psychological truth? No. Had he been a federal prisoner, the death penalty that Bush favored for drug kingpins would not have executed Horton. Under the terms in effect under the Reagan-Bush administration, Horton would have been eligible for furlough.

To reporters who called him in his Maryland prison during the campaign, Horton claimed, as he had at his trial, that he did not stab the youth he and two others were convicted of killing. Indeed, one court official indicated that another of the threesome had confessed to being the killer; the confession was disallowed because the suspect had not been read his Miranda rights. Under Massachusetts' felony rule, the prosecution did not have to ascertain which of the three committed the murder, only that all three were in some way involved. Horton claimed to have been in the getaway car. The prosecutors didn't know if Horton had held the knife; there was "reasonable doubt"; but, by virtue of his presence at the scene, they did know he was an accomplice. As parties to the robbery that occasioned the murder, all would be convicted.

Had a death penalty state handled the evidence on the robbery and murder that led to Horton's conviction in Massachusetts, Horton would not have been executed. The reason is simple. In 1982 in Enmund v. Florida [458 U.S. 782, 797 (1982)], the U.S. Supreme Court had invalidated a death sentence in a case that paralleled the one in Massachusetts. Like Horton, the convict in question had been an accessory to a robbery. Under the doctrine that said that a person party to a felony that results in a murder is guilty of the murder even if it cannot be proven that he committed it, Enmund had been convicted of capital murder. Invoking the Eighth Amendment's ban on disproportionate punishment, the Supreme Court set aside the death sentence.

Those who see relevance in the Horton case argue that a liberal Democrat would appoint to the high court justices more disposed to protect the rights of criminals than of the accused. And in that argument resides the final irony of the Horton case. The rollback of the rights of the
accused under the conservative Supreme Court could ultimately mean that the original confession obtained from Horton's colleague might have been deemed acceptable. Under the rules of a Bush but not a Dukakis court, Horton might not have been convicted of first-degree murder at all. And hence he would have been on the streets permanently, sooner than he was under the "liberal" court's requirements.

All narrative capitalizes on the human capacity and disposition to construct stories. A compelling narrative such as the Horton saga controls our interpretation of data by offering a plausible, internally coherent story that resonates with the audience while accounting causally for otherwise discordant or fragmentary information.24

When news and ads trace the trauma and drama of a kidnapping and rape by a convicted murderer on furlough, the repetition and the story structure give it added power in memory. Visceral, visual identifications and appositions are better able to be retrieved than statistical abstractions.

Repeatedly aired oppositional material carries an additional power. Material aired again and again is more likely to stay fresh in our minds. The same is true for attacks.

Cognitive accessibility is upped by those message traits that characterize the Republicans' use of Horton: the dramatic, the personally relevant, the frequently repeated topic or claim25—the menacing mug shot, circling convicts, empathic victims—and seemingly uncaring perpetrator—the Massachusetts governor.

When it came to William Horton, our quirks as consumers of political information worked for the Republicans and against the Democrats. In our psychic equations, something nasty has greater power and influence than something nice. When evaluating "social stimuli," negative information carries more weight than positive information.26 Additionally, negative information seems better able than positive to alter existing impressions27 and is easier to recall.28 Televised images that elicit negative emotion result in better recall than those that evoke positive ones.29 As a result, attacks are better remembered than positive reasons for voting for a candidate.30 And dissatisfied, disapproving voters are more likely to appear at their polling place than their more satisfied neighbors.31

Messages that induce fear dampen our disposition to scrutinize them for gaps in logic. When the message is fear arousing, personal involvement and interest in it minimize systematic evaluation.32 In the language of cognitive psychology, "[L]arge levels of negative affect such as fear may override cognitive processing."33

The Horton story magnifies fear of crime, identifies that fear with Dukakis, and offers a surefire way of alleviating the anxiety—vote for Bush. What successful use of fear appeal and narrative share is a capacity to focus audiences on one interpretation of reality while rendering
others implausible. When fear is aroused, attention narrows, simple autonomic behaviors are facilitated, complex, effort-filled ones inhibited, and creative thought dampened.

The mood induced by exposure to communication can affect our probability judgments as well. Johnson and Tversky asked college students to read descriptions that were assembled as if they were newspaper stories. After reading the material, the students were asked to estimate how frequently those within a group of 50,000 people would experience specific dangers (e.g., fire, leukemia, traffic accidents) within a one-year period. When the “newspaper” described the violent death of a male undergraduate, the estimates these college students offered increased for all of the risks, including those that were fundamentally dissimilar to the type described in the article. When the story concerned a happy event that occurred to a young man, the frequency estimates decreased.

Here is the answer to the question Peter Jennings put to Michael Dukakis near the end of the campaign. Why, wondered Jennings, for those we talk to across America, is “Willie Horton” so powerful an image (ABC, November 4, 1988)? The answer is that the fear the story inspired minimized the likelihood that it would be evaluated analytically and its atypicality noted; repetition of its riveting details in ads and news invited us to generalize from it. So, when the Bush furlough ad stated “many first-degree murderers” as the phrase “268 escaped” appeared on the screen, the inference that 268 “Willie Hortons” had been released to kidnap and rape was all but inevitable.

The power of the Horton mini-series was magnified as it unfolded soap-opera-like in news and ads; broadcasts that focused on the tale’s strategic intent and effect couldn’t effectively challenge its typicality. And since statistics don’t displace stories nor data, drama, the native language of Dukakis didn’t summon persuasive visions of the cops he had put on the street or the murders and rapes that hadn’t been committed in a state whose crime rate was down. Abetted by news reports, amplified by Republican ads, assimilated through the cognitive quirks of audiences, William Horton came to incarnate liberalism’s failures and voters’ fears.