

Character Assassination: An interdisciplinary approach

Eric Shiraev

George Mason University, USA

Any competition in social, professional, and political life often looks like a contest of words and images. To win in a political race or impress public opinion, people use symbols, labels, and colorful descriptions. Very often such descriptions are clear exaggerations and even distortions. They repeatedly aim not at other people's actions but rather at their personalities. By attacking an individual's personal life, facts of a biography, and specific individual features (which we will call them "character" for convenience) the attacker tries to hurt the victim politically, morally, socially, or psychologically and thus, depending on circumstances, remove him or her from a contest, sway public opinion, or achieve some other goal. We will call these attempts **character assassination**, which is a deliberate attempt to seriously damage the reputation, character, social status, or achievements of another person. The motivation for character assassination is typically rooted in the attackers' (assassin's) desire to harm the victim psychologically and reduce public support for the victim. This should ultimately devastate or even destroy his or her chances to succeed. In other cases, character assassination is conducted to hurt the cause that the victim symbolizes or defends.

More than fifty years ago, Jerome Davis in his classic book, "Character Assassination" tried to show that the attempts to smear someone's reputation are rooted in crystal clear political motivations and count on the public's "fear, ignorance, envy, suspicion, malice, jealousy, frustration, greed, aggression, economic rivalry, emotional insecurity and an inferiority complex" (Davis, 1950, p. 222). Mr Davis was on the defensive. He pursued his own political and personal goals trying to discredit other character "assassins" involved in deliberate campaign of lies and distortion against him. His book is rather a collection of essays about various smear tactics and is not necessarily a source that examines the goals, the means, or the mechanisms of character assassination. We attempt to continue the quest that Davis started almost sixty years ago.

Our preliminary research is an initial effort to compare various character assassination attempts that took place in history and in most recent times. We chose to select information coming from in various countries and related to different spheres of activities. At this stage, we focused primarily in politics but also paid attention to science and literature. We based our work

on historic facts and a series of interviews with scientists, entrepreneurs, and former politicians (which will be included in the second part of this study). This paper presents an initial attempt to apply several theories of political science, political communication, and political psychology to the study of character assassination. We wanted to know more about why character attacks occur, which tactics are used, and their efficiency.

Conditions of attacks

An individual who is a target of attacks on his or her character or behavior is called in our analysis a **victim** of an attack. Individuals or organizations involved in the attack are called **character assassins** or **attackers**. Attackers use specific **means** of attack ranging from articles published in mass media, oral or written statements, official testimonies, books and interviews, as well as rumors and other forms of information or disinformation.

Character assassination does not typically target the victim's actual professional or political record or other achievements. Instead, the attacks focus on contextual factors related to the victim's personality and behavior. The purpose of the attacks is clear. For example, political candidates in the United States informally accused of sexual or financial misconduct, or labeled as having "undesirable" traits such as indecisiveness or weakness, tend to be perceived more negatively by the public and usually spend considerable energy and resources defending themselves against such attacks even if the accusations are untrue (Schultz and Pancer, 1997).

Character assassination typically occurs under specific circumstances. The victim or the individual whose character and behavior are targeted has to be "qualified" as a potential victim of such assassination attempts. Who is the "typical" victim?

First, this person has to be engaged in a political or any type of competition involving the necessity to seek support or approval. It could be an election, pageant, or any type of selection or nomination process in which several candidates compete for a position, title, award, recognition, and so forth. Character assassination is used to discredit the reputation of this candidate with an ultimate goal to diminish his or her immediate chances for success in the eyes of the public. Senator George Allen of Virginia was deliberately portrayed as a racist in the 2006 elections because of the verbal blunder he committed describing a reporter a "macaca". These attacks probably contributed to his electoral defeat.

Second, the victim of attacks is an individual who has already achieved a social status or an important social position of power or reputation: this could be a government post, a relatively high position in social hierarchy, or simply high-profile status. Character assassination can be used to bring this individual down from the position of status or reputation. Attacks on President Clinton as a “liar” were relentless in the 1990s during the time of his infamous sex scandal involving a White House intern.

Third, a victim of character assassination is successful in a certain field such as business, government, science, or an artistic arena. Again, the attacks usually have little to do with these specific activities but rather with an individual’s personal qualifications, background, missteps, fumbles or anything else that could damage this person’s reputation as a scientist or artist. Sigmund Freud was openly accused of being a “pervert” and “sex maniac”. Barak Obama was repeatedly rumored to be a Muslim; Hillary Clinton was hinted about being a lesbian during her 2008 presidential campaign; and John McClain in the same year was said to have fathered a black baby.

Fourth, the victim represent a powerful ideology, theory, social or political cause, party, or movement. In these cases, the attackers attempt to weaken anything that the victim stands for. Another goal is to diminish support of potential followers. Anti-communists have long maintained that Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Communist revolution in Russia had syphilis; Kim Jong-il from North Korea was a big fan of American Westerns, and Karl Marx’s writings were part of a long-planned Zionist plot.

Let’s now consider different types of character assassination.

Types of character assassination

Character assassinations differ in terms of their scope (individual and collective), timing (“live” or post-mortem attacks), and momentum (planned or spontaneous).

- **Scope: Individual and Collective character assassination**

Collective character assassination is a form of summary punishment. In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, in China in the 1940s and Vietnam in the 1950s, the ruling Communist Parties conducted the unprecedented campaigns of accusations, lies, and distortions targeting a summary character of so-called *rich peasants*. They were routinely portrayed as greedy, mean, arrogant, and

uncaring. Songs and literature works were sponsored to inflict further damage. In doing so, the governments attempted to justify political violence against the well-to-do peasantry and to clean up the way toward total collectivization of agriculture in these countries. In Nazi Germany, the Nazi Party and then the whole state propaganda machine were launched to discredit the Jewish population, cause hostility among Germans against ethnic minorities, plant the seeds of violent antagonism, and then justify physical violence against the Jews and other social groups.

- **Time: Live attacks and post-mortem poisoning.**

Victims of character assassination could be “living and breathing” individuals as well as the deceased. Personal damage after an attack could occur at critical points of an individual career: character assassins try to “kill” because their slander is often the only weapon they have. Attacks against deceased people are conducted to discredit a cause, an idea, theory, or ideology that these individuals represented or stood for. For example, the biographies of Stalin in Russia, FDR, Reagan and Nixon in the United States, Gandhi in India, and scores of others are continued to be scrutinized today with the purpose to discredit their legacy.

- **Momentum: planned or spontaneous.**

During a political campaign, instantaneous or “drive-by” assassination usually take place. Quick character attacks are usually opportunistic. On the other hand, the slow pace of character “poisoning” is based on long-term hopes. Since the 1960s, the famous Russian author and dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn was accused of being a Jew, a traitor, a Nazi collaborator, a prison snitch, and a paid agent of foreign intelligence. His letters to his former wife were published and several quotes deliberately exposed. According to the attackers, Solzhenitsyn was a selfish, histrionic individual caring only about his fame and drawing attention to self. He was accused of sadistic attempts to destroy the otherwise great reputation of the Soviet Union. Such attacks continued after his death.

Why do they choose character assassination?

Several formal explanations or models about the decision to attack exist. Collectively, these models explain why character assassination occurs, when it occurs, who engages in it, and at

whom it is aimed. The first model intended to explain why candidates attack, while the latter two present more nuanced accounts of who is likely to attack whom, and under what circumstances. Nontechnical summaries of these models follow (Sigelman and Shiraev, 2002).

From the attacker's point of view

Sway the undecided. The Riker's (1996) model of negative campaigning explains why the Federalists and the Antifederalists in the 19th century's United States attacked one another over ratifying the Constitution. Both sides, Riker assumes, consisted of rational actors who believed the public could make rational decisions too. Both sides saw no point in trying to change minds that were already made up. Rationally, they concentrated on trying to sway undecided citizens. The best way to do this was to convince the undecided that if the other side won, something terrible might happen.

Davis and Ferrantino (1996) made the same conclusion. In their model, politicians increase their chances of being elected by making exaggerated claims about the benefits that everyone will get if they win. On the other hand, they increase their chances by exaggerating the dire consequences if they lose. Character assassination in this case could become an effective means to alarm or scare some voters and sway them into a desirable course of action. Candidates run less risk of being caught in a lie if they campaign negatively or attack: if candidate A wins and candidate B loses, voters can use A's subsequent performance in office to test the candidate's positive campaign pledges, but winning renders un-testable A's negative claims about what B would do if elected (Sigelman & Shiraev, 2002).

Create uncertainty. For Skaperdas and Grofman (1995), the attacks depend of the composition of a competition field. In the two-candidate variant of the model, the initial distribution of support for each candidate is known, as is the proportion of undecided voters. When X and Y wage equally positive campaigns, they split the undecided vote evenly. In this situation, X and Y encounter a problem of diminishing returns: the more positive their campaigns, the less extra support each wins from the shrinking pool of previously undecided voters. Alternatively, if X attacks Y this could move Y's current supporters into the undecided column. Character attacks thus determine the support to be subtracted from each candidate, with lost voters joining the ranks of the undecided or uncommitted. The extent to which X or Y

engages in attacks hinges on their relative standing in the "horse race." Able to win without converting those who support the opposition, the front-runner engages in "more positive, and less negative, campaigning than his opponent" (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995, 52). On the other hand, if the race is relatively close, the front-runner will be motivated to try to convert the rival's supporters. In the three-candidate variant of the model, the optimal strategy is to attack the stronger opponent. Because no candidate will attack the weaker rival, attacks should be directed against the front-runner or will come from the front-runner (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995, 50).

The primary elections in the United States in 2008 showed that the leading candidates (Clinton in the late 2007 and early 2008, Republicans Mike Huckabee and John McCain, and Barack Obama after February 2008) were under severe attacks from their opponents in their own political camp. Most of the attacks were directed at the opponent's personal ability to deliver what had been promised.

Prevent defections. For the previous "uncertainty" model, whether and whom a candidate attacks should depend primarily on who is ahead and by how much. According to the next model (Doron and On, 1983), where the candidates stand in issue space, their ideology, and political values also matters. Whereas favorable self-presentation is intended to strengthen the loyalty of X's supporters, the purpose of character assassination and other attacks is to bring uncommitted voters into the fold by leading them to see other, rival candidates or individuals as a threat. Attacking requires careful targeting: you have to attack those who may eventually "steal" your own supporters. The selective attack in this case fulfils two functions: it may make the other person unattractive to potential deserters from your "camp" and it may affect floating voters of other parties or candidates to come to your support. In simple terms, "one shakes the closest tree with the most apples so that they will fall next to him" (Doron and On 1983, 221). That is, the resources that X applies to attacking any Y are determined by the current level of support for each individual, but also by the ideological "gap" between the candidates. The greater the distance between X and Y, the less likely it becomes that an attack by X can persuade those who had been leaning toward Y to vote for X instead. Of course, even if Y is X's nearest ideological neighbor, X will have little to gain from attacking Y if Y is unpopular. Thus, each side concentrates its attacks on the largest rival within its own "political market" rather than attacking the rival who stands highest in the polls (Doron and On 1983, 221).

These formal models make sense. However, because the perceptions of character attacks vary widely from citizen to citizen, researchers cannot rely solely on advertisement and media content-based measures of negativity (Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). We should turn to the people who, in fact, witness character assassination attempts and make evaluations of such attempts. For example, the way in which campaign tactics or character attacks are perceived by the public depends on whether the candidate is the same gender as the person evaluating the candidate. Men tend to perceive female candidates who attacked their opponents less favorably than female candidates who did not attack their opponents (Schultz and Pancer, 1997).

Political psychologists have formulated several hypotheses explaining how people develop their attitudes toward political candidates. Although these theories do not deal specifically with character assassination, they provide valuable information about why personal attacks are effective and under which circumstances.

From the observer's point of view

The **update processing model** suggests that opinions are formed at the time of exposure to information, and that people integrate the evaluative implications of information by continuously updating a summary evaluative tally. When it is necessary to express an opinion, the summary tally is retrieved from memory (Lodge & Steenbergen, 1995). What is retrieved? According to the *wishful thinking* thesis, people have a tendency to fit perceptions of reality into a mold that is heavily influenced by their preferences. In other words, most people are predisposed to have certain opinions and change them only seldom. Character assassination is not likely to work, for example, against well-liked people because of the resistance to accept “bad” news about “good” people. Similar assessments can arrive from *cognitive balance* (Heider, 1949) and *cognitive dissonance* theories (Festinger, 1957). The studies in the fields of motivated reasoning, for instance, show that people are highly selective in what information they choose to believe, preferring to accept that information that is most congruent with existing attitudes or expectations or these people's actions, such as actual voting record or supporting a candidate (Dolan and Holbrook, 2001).

In sum, according to this model, long-term commitments of individuals play a very important role in reacting to character assassination attempts. More politically sophisticated

individuals should be less likely to rely on some perceived candidate's traits in forming their candidate preferences. Political sophistication entails the ability to link specific issues to each other and to organize those issues through broader, more abstract concepts (McGraw, 2003).

The ad-hoc processing model. Quite the reverse, under what has been designated as **ad-hoc processing**, opinions are constructed at the time the judgment is expressed, by retrieving specific pieces of information from long-term memory and combining the evaluative implications of the retrieved information to compute the judgment (Zaller & Feldman, 1992). In other words, judgments are probably formed “here” and “now”.

According to the *hot cognition* hypothesis, a person's behavioral responses to a word are faster when that word is primed by some related, congruent and emotionally charged concepts (Bargh, 1997). These studies suggest that specific words, including those related to politics or candidates, could automatically activate affective associations as well as semantic associations. It has been also speculated that emotional evaluations are stored in memory for most political concepts that have been repeatedly evaluated by an individual in the past, and that these affective responses are automatically extracted when the concept is activated in memory. Implicit evaluations were made in response to strongly positive and negative political stimuli, and that these evaluations affected the brain's response to the high-valence concept that followed (Morris et al., 2003)

Studies show that people evaluate candidates based on a relatively small number of personal characteristics. The first is integrity. The second is competence. And the third is personal characteristics involving appearance, likability, charm, charisma, and warmth (Pancer et al., 1999). According to this model, personality traits are seen to be stable over time, and by using emotions to automatically ascribe traits to their political leaders, individuals can make important decisions.

“Hybrid” processing model. Other theories try to reconcile the two existing points of view and suggest that people structure their impressions of candidates or respond to character assassination of a candidate using two types of information processing: either “update” or “ad-hoc”. Several factors play a role in terms of which type of processing is chosen.

The first factor is knowledge. Less knowledgeable individuals should rely more heavily on cognitively simpler (less abstract) and more accessible cues. Character attacks fall into this category. Less sophisticated individuals should choose candidates on the basis of party (directly,

rather than incorporating issue positions) and perceived candidate traits. People with more interest in and knowledge about politics are habitually involved in update processing and are efficient in doing so (McGraw et al., 1990). In contrast, people with less knowledge about politics are more likely to be influenced by considerations that are immediately accessible in memory and to be influenced by affective concerns (McGraw, 2003).

The second factor is interest. Information can be conceptualized in terms of its evaluative implications—that is, whether the individual has a positive or a negative affective reaction to information content. Increasingly, however, political psychologists argue that people tend to accept a coexistence of both positive and negative evaluations in their attitudes. Ambivalence ("the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes such as love and hatred) toward a candidate or an issue is critical to understanding attitudes and opinions.

The “anxiety processing” model. The foundation of this model is in an assumption that people have the active use of two systems located in the limbic region of the brain: the disposition and surveillance systems (Marcus et al., 2005). They are systems of quick evaluation that have a constant emotional impact on thinking and acting. For usual, recurring events, individuals rely on the disposition system. People use their learned repertoires, common reactions, and typical evaluations to accomplish their goals. For example, a person switches the television channel when a politician who he or she dislikes is speaking there. Moreover, people routinely, customary vote for political parties and not for the candidates on the ballot.

When novel and unsettling circumstances occur, however, a different reaction is needed. A person has to adjust by setting out on a new course, one that better meets the unexpected demands of an unusual situation. This person needs new strategies by departing from the familiar and allowing him or her to sense danger and novelty in the environment (LeDoux, 2000). Anxiety, or an emotional state of uncertainty and tension, can shift people from one mode of judgment to the other, and back.

When anxiety is low, the “automatic” disposition system allows people to rely on existing, standard reactions and opinions because low anxiety signals that the environment is relatively safe, recognizable, and predictable. In contrast, when anxiety is high—signaling that the environment is in some fashion uncertain and disturbed—a person chooses a new strategy. In such situations, it would likely be potentially dangerous not to pay attention to new information and to rely carelessly on familiar actions. In these environments, the surveillance system pushes

people to turn to consideration of contemporary information, and make a judgment. Reason and emotion influence each other in the process (Marcus et al., 2005). In sum, when conditions are unpredictable, then anxiety often plays an essential role in determining whether greater reliance is placed on “old” or “new” decisions.

Let's assess these models by accuracy of their explanations and, possibly, predictions. If the explanations and predictions do not stand up factually, then there will be all the more reason to rethink the models' assumptions in the future.

Content and methods of character assassination

Most character assassination attempts create a link between a victim's personal and inappropriate behavior and his or her good reputation: a collection of facts, images, and opinions related to this person's features, appropriate acts, expressed opinions, or creations. If a character attack is effective, such a link is established. Among the most common attacks we selected the following categories: anonymous lies, misquoting, silencing, vandalism, name calling, and alleged actions associations (including accusations of having a mental illness, being engaged in sexual deviance, and accusations treason).

Anonymous lies. Consider a few examples in a sea of cases in history. In 1778, several letters allegedly attributed to Washington and also allegedly seized from his servant began to circulate. These letters, claiming that he wanted to abandon the revolution, turned to be forged (Davis, 1950, 20-21). The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is another example of forgery in a group assassination attack. In 2004, a forged letter suggested that president George W. Bush had received special treatment in the military as a son of the high-ranked official.

A convenient place for character assassination today is Wikipedia. In a well-publicized case, for example, John Seigenthaler, a former editorial page editor at *USA Today* was accused of spying for the Soviets. Deliberate lies are most common in these areas: there could be falsifications of a person's early biography (character damaging allegations about siblings or parents), falsifications about inappropriate sexual behavior or sexual deviances, or forged evidence about the person's inappropriate social ties or political associations. Frequently, such “anonymous” assassins hide behind official names. As an illustration, Soviet KGB on February 17, 1976 asked the Central Committee to publish an article on behalf of an “independent” in the

popular satirical magazine *Krokodil* to attacking character of Andrei Sakharov, a prominent dissident and human-rights activist. In most recent times, in the United States, major political candidates did not escape anonymous lies and distortions spread about them through the Internet. According to them Barak Obama is a Muslim. Hillary Clinton is a lesbian. John McCain fathered a daughter with a black prostitute.

Misquoting. His is a common and surreptitious form of character assassination. Francis Bacon, for example, was deliberately misquoted by his opponents, jealous contemporaries, and political enemies. She demonstrates how writers often used quotes from Bacon to prove opposite opinions of him in a single work (Matthews, 1996). Today, an advanced google search showed 766 posted messages containing the phrase “I was misquoted”, 798 “he was misquoted” and 730 “she was misquoted”.

Misquoting is, generally, about taking out of context. This method of attack can also refer to images. An unfortunate posture, facial expression, an awkward situation caught on camera or tape is frequently used to ridicule an individual under attack.

Another effective form of distortion these days is *doctoring of images* based on compelling but untrue visual information.

Silencing. A long-term type of an assassination is chosen frequently when short-term attempts are exhausted or become inefficient. One of the goals of silencing is *memory erasing*. By avoiding any mentioning about individuals and their work, the attacker attempts to erase their record from collective memory. This form of character assassination was most effective in the past when attempted by government. For example, the ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union, February 19, 1973, has issued a secret decree prohibiting any public use of the name Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the state run media. Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev, after he was forced to resign in 1964, saw his name erased promptly from all magazines and books published and even in the archival publications he was addressed only as “Prime Minister”. Even the attacks on his policies contained no mentioning of his name and were just called, “voluntarism”. Silencing could be “visual” as well. Leon Trotsky, one of the top leaders of the Russian revolution of 1917, after being removed from power, also was removed from official photographs depicting him and other top Party leaders including Lenin and Stalin. In the Internet age, silencing becomes less effective.

Acts of vandalism. Symbols representing an individual or a group frequently become targets of violent acts by people motivated by a combination of jealousy, prejudice against, desire for retribution, or a Herostratus syndrome (a histrionic personality traits or motivations). George Washington portrait was defaced in 1781 at the Statehouse in Philadelphia when somebody broke into the building at night. Vandalism frequently backfires and hurts the reputation of the attacker.

Name-calling, demonization. This is the easiest way to attack because this method does not usually require factual proof. Thomas Jefferson was publicly attacked in the press as an atheist, adulterer, and robber (Davis, 1950, 24). Comparisons such as anarchists and liar were also used against him. Abraham Lincoln of all U.S. presidents has sustained probably the worst verbal and written attempts at his character. He was frequently cursed in the media as an ape, a baboon, a monster, a Negro, an idiot, and a buffoon. FDR in the 1930s was frequently accused for being a *destroyer of capitalism*, he was called *fascist*, a *dictator*, and one obsessed with personal power; he and his New Deal policies were frequently compared with Adolf Hitler, the Nazi; Benito Mussolini, the fascist, and Joseph Stalin, the Communist. President Richard Nixon was commonly called a reclusive, paranoid conspirator. Reagan was frequently referred to as an ignorant *cowboy or absent-minded old man*. The fact that he was a former *actor* was frequently used to underline his lack of political experience. Bill Clinton's most common and unpopular label was *womanizer* and *liar*. Al Gore is degraded as *a stiff*. George W. Bush's frequent label was *stupid*.

Specific demonizing labels. In science, the label *charlatan* was frequently applied to unordinary scientists who were famous, successful, or stood out. Name-calling was frequently used, often without a careful assessment, with one purpose: to damage or destroy the character of the scientist. German-born doctor Franz A. Mesmer, promoter of magnetism, American psychologist William James, Russian psychiatrist Vladimir Bekhterev, American inventor Thomas Edison is just a few examples of the use of demonizing labels.

In politics, ideological labels such as *communist*, *fascist*, *Nazi*, *capitalist*, *imperialist*, *terrorist*, etc. are quickly attached to political leaders and officials. The difference is only the context in which these labels are used. Mohammad Mossadeq, late prime-minister of Iran was given a label *communist sympathizer* by his opposition. In India, Mohandas Gandhi in his lifetime was called an *agent of the bourgeoisie*, a *running dog of imperialism*, a *class enemy* of

the poor. His rivals accused Gandhi of his peaceful ideology and the desire to mix religion and politics. In the United States in the 1940s and early 1950s any personal association with *communism* could have been detrimental to any political candidate or a public figure. This association could have been only alleged yet it was enough to destroy a political career. In 1944 supporters of presidential candidate Thomas Dewey attempted to associated vice president Truman with Sidney Hillman, a labor leader, who was alleged of being an agent for the Communist Party (Fraser, 1993).

Perhaps the most universal and powerful label ever attached to a politician, public figure, or scientist is *traitor*. The biggest attack was President Lincoln's patriotism. He was verbally attacked and accused of being a traitor to the nation. He was repeatedly compared to Robespierre and Charles I of England—the two had been executed. Russian writer Solzhenitsyn was publically called a traitor because he dared to write critical materials about Soviet history and communist establishment. The government further justified the use of the traitor label by arguing that Solzhenitsyn's books were published in the West. German Chancellor Willy Brandt was called a traitor because although he was born in Germany, he had emigrated to Norway and later Sweden in the 1930s escaping the nightmare of Nazism. Salman Rushdie is called a “cultural traitor” in Iran and Pakistan for his critical views of the Islamic establishment. In China, the most prominent group of traitors in the past, according to government accusations, was the “gang of four” led by Mao's widow, Jiang Qing, and her close associates, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyan, and Wang Hongwen. In public trials in 1981, they were deliberately exposed as malicious, selfish, and greedy individuals.

Hypocrite and *hypocrisy* are also common labels used in character attacks. These labels emphasize a person's double standards or discrepancies between things said and done. Environmental activists, for example, like former US vice president Al Gore, are attacked for consuming too much energy on personal needs and flying private jets. Lech Walesa, former president of Poland, an ardent anti-communist and leader of Polish democratic movement in the 1980s was frequently accused of being a long-time informant for Polish secret security services. Same accusations about KGB ties were used to discredit Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a flamboyant Russian politician and member of the Russian Duma.

Mental illness. Allegations that a person had in the past or is having now a mental illness are a common method of character assassination. Because of the historically strong (and

prevalent in every country) stigma attached to mental illness this label is frequently associated with insanity, madness, lack of rationality, instability, and irrationality of those who suffers from a psychological disorder. As a form of summary assassination scores dissidents in the former U.S.S.R. in the 1970s-80s (Bloch and Reddaway, 1977) and China approximately in the same period (Munro, 2000) were proclaimed mentally ill. Unable to silence some dissidents by intimidation and using the state-run medical system, communist security officials initiated a policy of diagnosing political “troublemakers” with mental illness. The diagnosis was also used as a legal ground for virtual imprisonment of such individuals in secured mental facilities. One of the most convenient labels used in both countries was "sluggish schizophrenia," the diagnosis of which did not require presence of any acute psychotic symptoms. Yet the patient’s criticism of the communist system was commonly labeled as delusional. Labeling political opponents mentally ill allows the authorities to diminish the importance of such opposition and set public opinion against it.

Labeling an individual mentally ill is a powerful weapon. Many people find convenient to attribute many circumstances of a politician’s life, especially if this politician is disliked, to his or her mental illness. After his death in 1924, Vladimir Lenin in Russia was accused of having syphilis he had allegedly contracted years earlier. Joseph Stalin was repeatedly “diagnosed” in absentia with various personality problems including Paranoid Personality Disorder and Delusional Disorder. Adolf Hitler is commonly diagnosed today with similar personality problems and delusions coupled with his neurological conditions. Mentioned earlier Mohammad Mossadeq, late prime-minister of Iran, was called drug addict and emotionally unstable. Critics of the Libyan leader Muammar Kaddafi label him emotionally unstable and delusional. Similar labels applied to Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Dr. Chee Soon Juan, Secretary General of oppositional Singapore Democratic Party was repeatedly called psychopath, the label suggestive of anti-social personality disorder. Influential conservative radio voice in the United States, Rush Limbaugh, was commonly labeled a *drug addict* by his critics.

Accusations of substance abuse are used by political and personal opponents with the purpose to discredit the victim and expose his weaknesses. President Boris Yeltzin of Russia, movie producer and actor Mel Gibson, President Jerald Ford, George Bush, Senators Edward Kennedy and Bob Packwood, to name a few, were constantly attacked for their drinking problems. Senator John Tower of Texas failed to win a cabinet confirmation in 1989. During his

nomination hearings, Tower was attacked as morally unfit to serve as Defense Secretary of excessive drinking and womanizing.

It is not surprising that one of the most conveniently positioned individual targeted by character assassins are top leaders including U.S. presidents. Those engaged in character poisoning are typically partisan or ideologically motivated and use real or imaginary facts about U.S. presidents to support their long-term goal to stain an opponent's reputation or satisfy self-fulfilling beliefs. Woodrow Wilson during his presidency developed atherosclerosis, which probably contributed to his inflexibility in negotiating several important policies including his inability to bring America into the League of Nations. Yet he was not mentally handicapped until the very last days, despite his critics' allegations. Richard Nixon's name is linked to labels paranoia, paranoid schizophrenic, and paranoid personality (at least 29 books related to his presidency mention this pathological personality feature). Vice-presidential candidate Thomas Eagleton in 1972 suffered a massive attack by his opponents who questioned his history of mental illness and suggested that his depression was a serious handicap for the job he was aspiring. Character poisoning of Ronald Reagan is frequently inseparable from mentioning of his Alzheimer's dementia (at least 6 books related to his political career emphasize this malady). Bill Clinton in the eyes and writings of his attackers remained a sex addict. President Ford echoed a widespread sentiment among Clinton's critics calling him a pathological liar (DeFrank, 2007). George W. Bush's character is constantly under attack as well. On the Internet the most common label is *retarded*. In 2004, there were online essays suggesting that Bush had anti-social personality disorder. Even in research articles, his IQ was attacked: although it is relatively high compared to the average American, still, Bush is evaluated as having the lowest I.Q. of all presidents during the last 50 years (Simonton, 2006). Other scientists are more blatant. Justin Frank (2007) called Bush the most psychologically damaged president since Nixon. Paul Levy (2006) referred to Bush's madness and suggests a new term, *malignant egophrenia* or a psycho-spiritual disease of the soul.

Sexual deviance. Personal life of politicians and other people of achievement has become an area of massive character attacks particularly in the 20th century. With the growing influence of public opinion, moral behavior (regardless of how it is defined) became a desirable standard any deviation from which could become an excuse for character attacks. Short-term character assassination attempts are frequently based on an alleged or secret extramarital affair.

Long term-character poisoning requires facts and allegations about a person's persistent sexual deviance.

Two prominent psychologists in U.S. history: James Baldwin and John Watson were forced to resign from his top academic positions back in 1908 and 1920 respectively because of their behavior involving women. Anti-communist attacks against Soviet leadership frequently alleged enormous sexual appetites of Stalin's close associates such as Lavrenty Beria who is portrayed today in some reports as sexual maniac and sadist. The same labels attributed to Saddam Hussein sons killed in 2003. German Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1974 was attacked for his secret sexual affairs before a spy scandal ended his career in the government. U.S. Senator Gary Hart, a major contender for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination was also caught in an affair. After he was exposed on the front pages of leading newspapers and on primetime television news he dropped out of the presidential race. President Bill Clinton will probably carry the sex addict label forever.

Implementation of theory to character assassination. Case: Mental illness.

Which existing theories explain character assassination well and which theories are unconvincing? Let's compare the models by using the attacks using "mental illness" or "psychological problems" as damaging labels.

In political science, some of the assumptions upon which the **sway the undecided** model is based seem problematic. For example, central to this model is the assumption that voters cannot judge the truth or falsity of an attack until the campaign is over. From this assumption it follows that candidates have no incentive to be truthful and, unencumbered by such constraints, are free to attack one another relentlessly such as accusing the opponent of having a psychological problem. However, electoral experience suggests that character attacks of this kind would not require voters to wait months or even years to judge the validity of such attacks.

Accusations that many political dissidents were mentally sick was an organized campaign launched by communist governments in the Soviet Union and China with the purpose to discredit further the already weak political opposition but most importantly, receive support and approval of their actions among the ordinary people. In fact, sociological observations conducted in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 70s show that the vast majority of people believed in

government's stories about political dissent as a camouflaged mental illness. Most people had a negative view of dissidents (Shlapentokh, 1986). These facts partially support the assumptions of the **prevent defections** model. Instead of giving people a chance to think about political dissent and political freedom, the government has launched a subtle propaganda campaign of explaining about why some people criticize the government: they are mentally ill. Moreover, if people still doubted about the validity of the government's claims, they could quickly realized that mental hospitals were ready for new patients demanding freedom. The **anxiety processing model** may also find partial support here. People in China and the Soviet Union were given convenient explanations for many potentially puzzling questions about a citizen's political freedoms and the right to dissent. Thus the anxiety level was not changed and most people had no need to seek new answers because they knew that some "good" answers had been provided to them conveniently by their authorities.

The **update processing model** might help understand how people react to information about a political leader's alleged mental illness or a serious psychological problem. According to this model, people who are aware of politics are unlikely to change their opinion about a politician or this politician's reputation despite the facts suggestive of his or her mental illness. On the other hand, this person's opponents are likely to consider such facts important. For example, the fact that John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, was imprisoned during the Vietnam War and was tortured in the Vietnamese prison led some critics to suggest that McCain should have suffered from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and that some symptoms of this condition could be detrimental to his job at the White House: his opponents recalled frequent outbursts of anger, tendency to develop depression, and overall emotional instability.

Nothing can attract that much attention than sensational statements about mental health of highest officials. For example, a recent study alleged that about 50 percent of U.S. presidents suffered from some kind of mental illness (Davidson et al., 2006). The **ad-hoc processing model** might be used here to explain how people would react to these statements. Most knowledgeable people, who know what a diagnostic method involves, are very unlikely to believe that American presidents suffered from debilitating mental illnesses preventing them from functioning properly in the White House. However, studies of public opinion show that in the United States there is a stable proportion of individuals ranging from 10 to 15 percent (and they are not necessarily the

same group of people) who, according to the polls, believe in various conspiracy theories, mystical events, and bizarre theories, especially if they involve government. Among popular accusations are the moonwalk of Neil Armstrong labeled as a massive hoax; the allegation that the attacks on September 11, 2001 were organized by the government; the charge that the government knows who killed President Kennedy; or the claims that government secretly holds an alien ship in a top-secret facility. Such individuals tend to accept character assassination attempts as legitimate.

The theories developed in political science and political psychology may shed some light on why some character assassination attempts succeed and why some of them end in a flop. Overall, the preliminary conclusion is that most of character assassination attempts may form or change opinions of a certain proportion of population, which is exactly that character assassins are counting for. In fact, **sway the undecided** and **create uncertainty** models claim exactly that character assassination is likely to work in most cases because there will always be people who can perceive the alleged facts as truth and vote or act in a desirable —for character attacker’s— direction.

These models may also explain why character assassination backfires from time to time. Personal attacks against George W. Bush during presidential elections in 2004 apparently backfired with a greater effect than the Bush’s attacks against the Democratic opponent Senator Kerry. According to opinion polls (Shiraev and Sobel, 2006) and in line with the **hybrid processing** model, there was a substantial number of people who knew enough about the misgivings of George Bush, the incumbent president at that time. New attacks against Bush did not add anything to their knowledge. Moreover, constant personal attacks on the president in the media could have caused a reversed reaction of immediate resentment against the attackers and political forces they represented or appeared to represent. In another example, in 2003, Italian prime-Minister Silvio Berlusconi got himself into trouble when he called a member of the European Parliament, a German socialist, “well fit” for the role of a Nazi leader in a movie about concentration camps. Berlusconi apologized. There are certain cultural and national issues that people perceive with a great sense of resentment. Among these issues are German fascism, repressions against own people during the Stalin’s reign, racism, political genocide in China under Mao’s rule, and many other historic facts that people of these nationalities tend to consider rather inappropriate to use even in “civilized” character attacks.

However, basic rules for such “civilized” character attacks are not written yet. Everyone using character assassination at this moment plays “by ear” trying different strategies because many of them have been effective in the past.

References

- Bargh, J. A. (1997). The automaticity of everyday life. In R. S. Wyer Jr. (Ed.), *The automaticity of everyday life: Advances in Social Cognition*, vol. 10 (pp. 1-61). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bloch, S., Reddaway, P. (1977). *Psychiatric Terror: How Soviet Psychiatry Is Used to Suppress Dissent*. New York, Basic Books, 1977.
- Davidson J.R, Connor K.M., Swartz M. (2006). Mental illness in U.S. Presidents between 1776 and 1974: a review of biographical sources. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*. January, 194(1):47-51.
- Davis, Jerome (1950). *Character Assassination*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Davis, Michael L., and Michael Ferrantino (1996). Towards a positive theory of political rhetoric: Why do politicians lie? *Public Choice* 88: 1-13.
- DeFrank, Thomas (2007). *Write it when I am gone*. New York: Putnam Adult
- Dolan, Kathleen and Holbrook, Thomas M. (2001). Knowing versus Caring: The Role of Affect and Cognition in Political Perceptions Kathleen Source: *Political Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 27-44
- Doron, Gideon, and Uri On (1983). A rational choice model of campaign strategy. In Asher Arian, ed., *The Elections in Israel, 1981*. Tel Aviv: Ramot Publishing.
- Frank, Justin (2007). *Bush on the Couch Rev Ed: Inside the Mind of the President*. NY: Harper
- Fraser, Steven (1993). *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kinder, D. R. (1986). Presidential character revisited. In R. R. Lau & D. O. Sears (Eds.), *Political Cognition* (pp. 233-255). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- LeDoux, J. E. (2000). Emotion circuits in the brain. In *Annual Reviews Neuroscience* (Vol. 23, pp. 155–184). Palo Alto: Annual Reviews.
- Levy, Paul (2006). *The Madness of George W. Bush: A Reflection of Our Collective Psychosis*. NY: Authorhouse
- Lodge, M., and Steenbergen, M. (1995). The responsive voter: Campaign information and the dynamics of candidate evaluation. *American Political Science Review*, 89, 309-326.
- Marcus, George E.; Sullivan, John L.; Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth; Stevens, Daniel. (2005). The Emotional Foundation of Political Cognition: The Impact of Extrinsic Anxiety on the Formation of Political Tolerance Judgments. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 26 Issue 6, pp 949-963.
- Mathews, Nieves (1996). *Francis Bacon: The History of a Character Assassination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- McGraw, Kathleen M., Edward Hasecke, Kimberly Conger (2003). Ambivalence, Uncertainty, and Processes of Candidate Evaluation Author(s): Source: *Political Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 421-448
- Morris, James P., Nancy K. Squires, Charles S. Taber, Milton Lodge (2003). Activation of Political Attitudes: A Psychophysiological Examination of the Hot Cognition Hypothesis Source: *Political Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Special Issue: Neuroscientific Contributions to Political Psychology, pp. 727-745
- Munro Robin. (2000). Judicial psychiatry in China and its political abuses. *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 14:1-125.
- Pierce, Patrick A. (1993). Political Sophistication and the Use of Candidate Traits in Candidate Evaluation. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Mar., 1993), pp. 21-35
- Pancer, S. Mark, Steven D. Brown, Cathy Widdis Barr (1999). Forming Impressions of Political Leaders: A Cross-National Comparison. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 2, (June), pp. 345-368
- Riker, William H. (1996). *The Strategy of Rhetoric: Campaigning for the American Constitution*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Schultz, Cindy and Pancer, S. Mark (1997). Character Attacks and Their Effects on Perceptions of Male and Female Political Candidates Author(s): Source: *Political Psychology*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (Mar., 1997), pp. 93-102
- Shiraev, Eric and Sobel, Richard (2006). *People and their Opinions*. NY: Longman.
- Shlapentokh, Vladimir. (1986). *Soviet Public Opinion and Ideology*. New York: Praeger.
- Sigelman, Lee and Mark Kugler Source. Why Is Research on the Effects of Negative Campaigning so Inconclusive? Understanding Citizens' Perceptions of Negativity (2003). *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 65, No. 1, pp. 142-160
- Sigelman, Lee and Shiraev, Eric (2002). The Rational Attacker in Russia? Negative Campaigning in Russian Presidential Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 45-62
- Simonton, Dean (2006). Presidential IQ openness, Intellectual Brilliance, and Leadership: Estimates and Correlations for 42 U.S. Chief Executives. *Political Psychology*. 27, 4, 511-526.
- Skaperdas, Stergios, and Bernard Grofman (1995). Modeling negative campaigning. *American Political Science Review* 89: 49-61.
- Soviet Archives at Info-Russ collected by Vladimir Bukovsky, prepared for electronic publishing by Julia Zaks and Leonid Chernikhov <http://psi.ece.jhu.edu/~kaplan/IRUSS/BUK/GBARC/buk.html>
- Zaller, J. R., & Feldman, S. (1992). A simple theory of the survey response: Answering questions versus revealing preferences. *American Journal of Political Science*, 36, 579-616.