

# Campaign Documentaries: Behind-the-Scenes Perspectives Make Useful Teaching Tools

David Wolfford

Over the last 20 years, independent filmmakers have produced insightful documentaries of high profile political campaigns with behind-the-scenes footage. These documentaries offer inside looks and unique perspectives on electoral politics. This campaign season, consider *The War Room*; *A Perfect Candidate*; *Journeys With George*; *Chisholm '72*; *Street Fight*; and *By the People* as effective teaching tools for conveying the complex issues and events related to political campaigns and elections.

Each of the above mentioned films are artifacts of modern American political history. They reveal the intricacies of our electoral institutions, are worthy of review and discussion in political science or other social studies classes, and can also help teachers cover state and national standards. As social studies film specialist William Russell has noted, movies elicit thoughtful questions, “can increase student interest...[and] help evoke meaningful inquiry of topics, which allows students to make insightful decisions.” Marcus and Stoddard suggest films for “promoting reasoned judgment, preparing citizens for democracy, and deliberating the common good.”<sup>1</sup> I would add that high school students require vivid, real life examples and colorful characters to explain complicated electoral concepts.

## Film Analysis

The highlighted movies convey familiar people and institutions, provide examples of polling, image making, the media’s role, campaign staff, debates,

and TV advertising, while containing conflict, suspense, and emotional twists. The films illustrate the rigors of campaigning, the irregular lifestyle, and the personalities who take up the cause.

In both *The War Room*, which captures Bill Clinton’s 1992 run, and *A Perfect Candidate*, which follows Oliver North’s 1994 Senate bid, campaign staff scarf down snacks on the go and consume impromptu meals when possible. *The War Room* casts the odd couple of strategist James Carville, a.k.a the “Ragin’ Cajun,” and communications director George Stephanopoulos. Protagonist Carville, “the bright kid who doesn’t quite fit in socially but whose talents cannot be denied,” shifts from determined strategist to jolly on-looker to vengeful Clinton advocate.<sup>2</sup> Stephanopoulos serves as his reasoned, coolheaded sidekick. In *A Perfect Candidate*, Mark Goodin, Ollie North’s campaign manager, is an intense personality who smokes, drinks, curses, and charms. He and his associates run on minimal sleep, a little nicotine and

alcohol, while riding emotional ups and downs into a slap-happiness that entertains the viewer.

All films follow a similar chronology—from the candidate’s announcement through the election—with a competitive narrative. *A Perfect Candidate* and *Street Fight*, which covers a Newark mayoral race, sum up and analyze lesser-known elections, drawing students in as they look toward the resolution. If you find suspense a useful hook in your class, ask students to refrain from Googling the election’s outcome until the film is over.

Some films include comic relief. *Journeys with George*, Alexandra Pelosi’s portrayal of George W. Bush’s 2000 quest for office, is a light-hearted look at the race and at Bush. Journalists poke fun at the candidates and at each other. When Bush lets his guard down and puts on a show for reporters, Pelosi films him: on the campaign airplane blindfolded, bowling with oranges, and exaggerating his Texas swagger.

Much like parallel Hollywood features, such as *The Candidate* and *Bulworth*, these documentaries point to scandal, the marketing of candidates, the money game, and other bitter campaign pills that disillusion citizens. Hypocrisy is exposed and the “best candidate” doesn’t always win. This

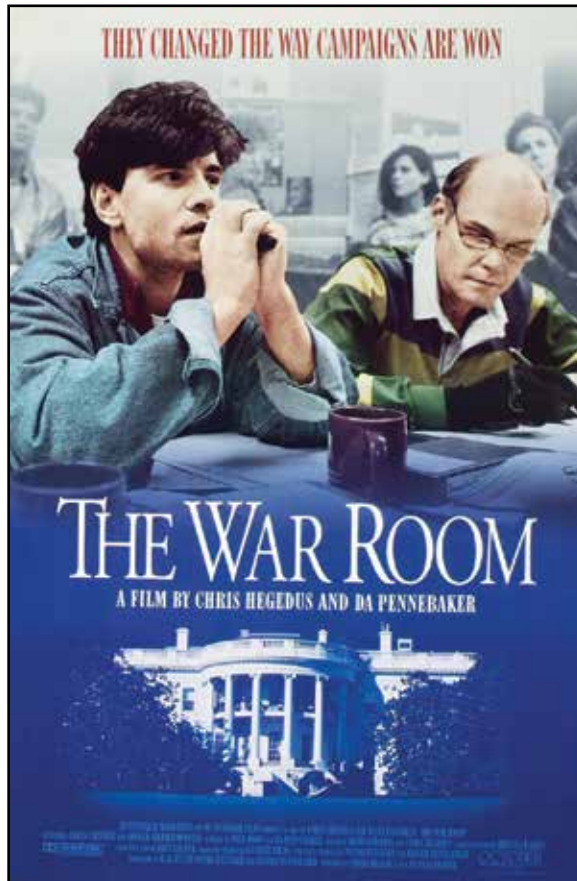
cynicism may be overplayed, according to R.J. Cutler who helped create both *The War Room* and *A Perfect Candidate*. He admits, “It’s hard to believe I would walk away uncynical of the process”; yet he contends our election system is a good one, regardless of how the films might be received.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike classic informative documentary—with talking heads and stock footage—these faster-paced, contemporary, independent films are more appealing to student viewers. I particularly notice increased attentiveness with films shot and produced in the *cinéma vérité* style. Literally meaning “cinema truth,” *cinéma vérité* is characterized by up-close-and-personal shots, no narration, and no obvious filmmaker interference, making the audience feel involved, as if events are unfolding in the here and now. Filmmakers avoid narration and interviews to provide a sense of real time chronology of subjects who disregard the camera. Viewers tend to forget that they are watching something that has been recorded, edited, and discussed.

Verité classics include *Primary* (1961), a look at the Kennedy-Humphrey Wisconsin primary election, and *Don’t Look Back* (1967), which follows Bob Dylan’s last acoustic tour in England. D.A. Pennebaker worked on both of these films. It is fitting, then, that Pennebaker and his wife Chris Hegedus pioneered the modern campaign film with *The War Room*. More recently, lighter digital equipment has opened the door for other documentarians to capture their subjects and present them in the *vérité* style. *A Perfect Candidate* and *By the People*, which follows Barack Obama’s quest for the presidency, followed suit.

The other three films under review are performance documentaries, where either the filmmaker’s artistic creation is central to the movie’s appeal, or the filmmaker appears in the film. *Chisholm ’72: Unbought and Unbossed*

is a colorful and inspiring presentation that covers New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm’s quest for the Democratic presidential nomination. Producer Shola Lynch catalogues Chisholm’s story with a mix of historical footage and recent interviews, while



maintaining viewer attention with split screens and a funky score à la 1972.

*Street Fight* and *Journeys With George* are *vérité*-leaning, however, their filmmakers interact with the subject, read voiceover, and become part of the story. Both include pre-arranged interviews and impromptu conversations. Alexandra Pelosi recalls that George W. Bush, “realized he was either going to be the butt of the joke or the star of the show. So he decided to be the star.” In reality, Bush is at times the butt of the joke while Pelosi competes for the star role, injecting herself into the story and briefly highlighting her developing romance with another reporter. One review labels her “motor

mouthed” and “manic.”<sup>4</sup> *Street Fight’s* Marshall Curry, on the other hand, planned his account of the 2002 Newark mayoral campaign in a *vérité* style, but found narration necessary for context. Curry’s is a more subtle role—a victim of incumbent Mayor Sharpe James’s goons—while challenger Cory Booker’s fight in Newark bare-knuckle politics remains the primary tale.

### Selecting the Right Film

In selecting the right film for your class, consider appropriateness, perspective, and the election depicted. The films are generally appropriate for high school students and have only mild adult themes and occasional adult language. Two movies touch on sex scandals. In the opening minutes of *The War Room*, a reporter cheekily asks former Clinton mistress Gennifer Flowers at a press conference, “Did Governor Clinton use a condom?” In *A Perfect Candidate*, Virginia Senator Chuck Robb’s indiscretions become an issue and his mistress becomes a *Playboy* cover girl. At one point in *Journeys With George*, the press bus slowly passes a demonstrator mooning the convoy with “Raise Minimum Wage” printed on his posterior.

Foul language can be heard to some degree in all these films because it can be heard in the backrooms of all campaigns. None earned an R rating. If such scenes raise concern at your school, consider parental permission forms or cautiously skip the rare offensive segment.

In addition to governing the appropriate, teachers should strive for accuracy and consider objectivity in film. These documentaries use entirely real footage, talk to real people, and are thus realistic. Don Baker, *The Washington Post* reporter who plays the ref in *A Perfect Candidate*, says of its directors’ commitment to accuracy, “I think they scored ‘A Perfect 10.’”<sup>5</sup> Collectively, candidates’ post-election critiques

# STUDENT QUESTIONS

**What are the candidates' names and party affiliations? How does the film introduce the candidate(s)?**

**How does the filmmaker treat the different candidates?**

**What candidates' positions reveal their party ideology? Do they ever deviate from party doctrine?**

**Who are the base supporters for these candidates? What motivates them?**

**Describe the televised debate. How did candidates perform? What was discussed?**

**How do the campaigns create and utilize TV commercials? What strategy do they follow?**

**What election laws, customs or procedures are discussed?**

**What campaign localities seemed important to the candidates? Why?**

**Describe the interaction between the campaigns and the media/reporters.**

**Which candidate would you vote for and why?**

**What did you learn from the behind-the-scenes perspective?**

**What would you like to know more about regarding this documentary?**

of these films have fallen short of proving any factual misrepresentations and instead sound more like general complaints of unsatisfactory media coverage. Though accurate, each tells a story with a viewpoint. We must remember that independent filmmakers are not beat reporters and most documentaries don't purport to be front-page journalism. "[C]riticizing documentary films for their lack of objectivity is akin to lambasting an editorial because it is not a 'just the facts' news story," says Diana Hess. A film's noticeable slant should not rule it out for class, but should rather offer teachable moments in media literacy. Marcus and Stoddard agree that these perspectives "should not be eschewed or removed but highlighted and examined."<sup>6</sup> Absolute objectivity in film choice is essentially unattainable, but it could be a good idea to choose a film that will counterbalance other sources or perspectives in your course.

These movies veer from journalistic purity, but are fair to their subjects—typically more favorable to the star candidate—and are shaped by the filmmaker's access to the campaigns. It would be difficult for Alexandra Pelosi, daughter of former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and herself "an avowed liberal" according to *Time* magazine, to treat Bush without bias. *Entertainment Weekly* correctly called Shola Lynch's *Chisholm '72* an "unadulterated valentine to her late subject." *New York* magazine declared that *By the People*, which shows Obama's climb from candidate to president, "is not a warts-and-all political exposé."<sup>7</sup>

The one-sidedness of these movies is often a consequence of the opposing campaign's refusal to grant interview access to the filmmakers. Nearly all producers set out to film two or more campaigns but were forced to focus on the one candidate who cooperated. No campaigns gave unlimited access. The producers of *The War Room* titled it so because, for much of the 1992 campaign, that's the only place the Clinton team

allowed them with cameras, in the Little Rock headquarters.<sup>8</sup> While trying to film *Street Fight*, Marshall Curry was denied entrance to events by the James campaign and was often harassed by James's security detail when attempting to film at a park or public event.

Is it better to show a presidential campaign or a different campaign? *Chisholm '72*, *War Room*, *Journeys With George*, and *By the People* focus on presidential contests, while *A Perfect Candidate* and *Street Fight* showcase down-ballot contests. The presidential campaign films show the stages and institutions of our national elections: the primary system, national conventions, and the Electoral College. There are obvious benefits to showing one of these during the fall of 2012. At the same time, many students and citizens ignore state and local elections and this is a good opportunity to teach about them. *Street Fight* successfully conveys urban machine politics in a non-partisan municipal election. *A Perfect Candidate* shows how statewide Senate candidates must take national issues to unique local constituencies. In both, candidates encounter electoral subgroups, donors, and hecklers.

All six documentaries expose students to different people and unusual circumstances. Marcus et al. contend that the social studies classroom is "the proper place to experience people ... [different from ourselves] to seek to understand 'the other.'"<sup>9</sup> These movies examine people and issues in other times, in other places, and in other professions. *Chisholm '72* focuses on a unique candidate in a unique era. Lynch conveys Shirley Chisholm's challenges as the first black woman in two traditionally white men's clubs, Congress and presidential politics. Chisholm recounts how she faced ridicule in Congress and dangers on the campaign trail. Chisholm had no chance at the Democratic nomination, but by mid-1972 she had earned her right as "a broker" at the convention. She also put a crack in the glass ceiling for both Barack

Obama and Hillary Clinton.

*Street Fight* provides a look at Mayor James's supporters hassling Curry and will generate an interesting discussion about freedom of the press and other civil liberties violations. Pelosi's *Journeys With George* is as much a commentary on the traveling press corps as it is on George W. Bush. Viewers will begin to understand the demands and challenges for travelling journalists. One reporter's wife gives birth to their baby while he is on the campaign trail. *By the People* will help today's students better understand their current president, first lady, and the current presidential election. It casts Team Obama's inner circle of David Axelrod, David Plouffe, and Robert Gibbs, who will be familiar faces on the news in October. *By the People* will enhance student understanding of both 2008 and 2012.

### Teaching Campaign Documentaries

I recall the legacy of a veteran teacher's rather passive use of classroom video during the early Betamax era. "Here's a movie about World War II," he would introduce, "Let's watch it." The tape didn't stop for three days. Classroom viewing requires a more calculated approach. Russell suggests a four-stage method: prepare, preview, watch, and assign a culminating activity. Whether you subscribe to Russell's model or your own, proper planning and execution will keep the students on task and enhance the film's effectiveness.

The highlighted films are available in public libraries and for purchase online. Preview the selected movie in advance with a notepad or laptop handy. Anticipate student questions and generate some of your own. Select a few points at which to stop the film for discussion or to add context. Note the counter numbers. High school students today do not know about Shirley Chisholm, Iran-Contra, or Hillary Clinton's "3AM Phone Call" commercial. Since instructional time is typically limited, decide if it is worth showing the entire film or only parts.

## CAMPAIGN DOCUMENTARIES

### ***The War Room*** (1993)

Run time: 1 Hour, 37 Min. (97 min.); Rated: PG

Producers: Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker

In *The War Room* Democratic strategist James Carville and communications director George Stephanopoulos guide Bill Clinton from the New Hampshire primary through his November victory.

**Website Resources:** The American Presidency Project, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php), and [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1992](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1992)

### ***A Perfect Candidate*** (1996)

Run Time: 1 hour, 45 min. (105 min.); Not Rated

Directors: R.J. Cutler and David Van Taylor

Lt. Col. Oliver North rose to infamy and celebrity in the mid-1980s as Congress investigated the Iran-Contra scandal. In 1994, he reemerged to challenge Virginia Senator Chuck Robb. Neither was *A Perfect Candidate*.

**Website Resources:** Encyclopedia Virginia, [www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Robb\\_Charles\\_S\\_1939](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Robb_Charles_S_1939); Our Campaigns, [www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=3454](http://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=3454)

### ***Journeys With George*** (2002)

Run time: 1 hour, 19 min. (79 min.); Not Rated

Producer: Alexandra Pelosi

In *Journeys With George*, Alexandra Pelosi follows Texas governor George W. Bush throughout the 2000 campaign against Al Gore.

**Website Resources:** 2000 Presidential Election, [www.2000presidentialelection.com/](http://www.2000presidentialelection.com/); The Livingroom Candidate, [www.livingroomcandidate.org](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org)

### ***Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed*** (2004)

Run time: 1 hour, 17 min. (77 min.); Not Rated

Producer: Shola Lynch

"I wanted you to get to know '72 presidential politics through her eyes and through [Shirley Chisholm's] story," says Lynch of *Chisholm '72*. Her film does just that while highlighting the DNC's nomination procedures, the Miami convention, Nixon, and McGovern.

**Website Resources:** PBS, [www.pbs.org/pov/chisholm/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/chisholm/); Black Americans in Congress, [baic.house.gov/member-profiles/profile.html?intID=24](http://baic.house.gov/member-profiles/profile.html?intID=24)

### ***Street Fight*** (2005)

Run time: 1 hour, 26 min. (86 min.); Not Rated

Director: Marshall Curry

"There's an old joke in Newark," Curry narrates, "that an incumbent only leaves office in death or conviction." Viewers will understand this as they watch rising political star Cory Booker challenge corrupt incumbent Mayor Sharpe James.

**Website Resources:** PBS, [www.pbs.org/pov/streetfight/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/streetfight/); IMDb, [www.imdb.com/name/nm2490944/bio](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2490944/bio)

### ***By the People: The Election of Barack Obama*** (2009)

Run Time: 1 hour, 56 min. (116 min.); Not Rated

Directors: Amy Rice and Alicia Sams

*By the People* presents Barack Obama's quest for the presidency. There's an emphasis on the Obama family, Iowa and New Hampshire, Hillary Clinton, and the candidate's unique story.

**Website Resources:** CNN, [www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/president/](http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/president/); *The New York Times*, [elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/map.html](http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/map.html); Open Secrets, [www.opensecrets.org/pres08/](http://www.opensecrets.org/pres08/)

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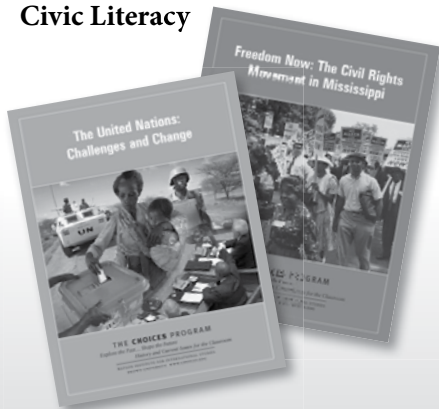
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Spend 10 to 15 minutes introducing the film, emphasizing the key players, events, and vocabulary terms. A substantial introduction will also set a favorable tone and legitimize the film beyond mere “filler.” These works will hold student attention better than most documentaries, but students still need incentives. Perhaps type a “Cast of Characters” handout to distribute. Have students answer questions on paper or in your occasional class discussion. I typically include a few on my tests. Consider an accompanying assessment and foreshadow it before hitting the play button, like comparing the film to a printed primary source from a different perspective, assigning a movie review, or conducting a classroom role play or mock debate.

I find it useful to freeze the video at predetermined points. When a public opinion poll appears on the screen, discuss numbers and polling methodology. Pausing immediately after a reporter asks a question will allow for a discussion of political journalism, the nature of press questions, and how a candidate or staffer might spin the answer. Most films devote several minutes to Election Day scenes. Stop the disc and have students cast a vote on a simulated ballot or scrap sheet of paper. Call on volunteers to explain or defend their vote. When the film ends, compare the class vote against the real vote. This usually provides a good segue into a conversation about filmmakers’ choices and perspective. Why might viewers hold different opinions than the actual electorate at the time? These filmmakers reportedly shot and spliced between 70 and 200 hours of footage. Because these films seem like all-inclusive, behind-the-scenes productions, educators must remind

students how even “cinema truth” can be misleading.

### Conclusion

From *The War Room* to *By the People*, modern campaign documentaries provide the social studies teacher colorful characters, handy examples, and compelling narratives that can assist in conveying electoral politics. Whatever the film, consider a systematic approach that assures student attention and understanding.



### Notes

1. William Benedict Russell III, *Teaching Social Issues with Film* (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age, 2009).
2. Alan S. Marcus and Jeremy D. Stoddard, “The Inconvenient Truth about Teaching History with Documentary Film: Strategies for Presenting Multiple Perspectives and Teaching Controversial Issues,” *The Social Studies* (Nov/Dec 2009): 281.
2. Richard Schnickel, “Cinema,” *Time* (Nov. 8, 1993): 84.
3. R.J. Cutler on *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, Sept. 7, 2000.
4. James Poniewozik, “Seduction at 40,000 Feet,” *Time* (Nov. 11, 2002).
5. Don Baker, interview and correspondence with author, 2007.
6. Diana Hess, “From *Banished* to *Brother Outsider*, *Miss Navajo* to *An Inconvenient Truth*: Documentary Films as Perspective-Laden Narratives,” *Social Education* 71, no. 4 (May/June 2007): 194-95; Marcus and Stoddard, 282.
7. James Poniewozik and Sam Adams, “Chisholm ’72,” *Entertainment Weekly* (March 4, 2005): 58-59; Logan Hill, “Conversation: All-Access Obama,” *New York* (Nov. 1, 2009): 71.
8. D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus interview, *A Perfect Candidate*, (Criterion, 2004) DVD Feature.
9. Alan S. Marcus, Scott Alan Metzger, Richard J. Patterson, and Jeremy D. Stoddard, *Teaching History with Film: Strategies for Secondary Social Studies* (New York: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis, 2010), 31-32.

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