

# Three Little Words: Law and Order, Videostyle Framing, and Dog Whistle Racism in Richard Nixon's 1968 Campaign

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## Abstract

*"Law and order" has been a GOP catchphrase since the early 1960s but was popularized by Richard Nixon in 1968. In a carefully crafted presidential campaign centered on the use of television, Nixon adopted and normalized the term "law and order." An employment of dog whistle racism, the phrase implicitly refers to law enforcement but suggests to a targeted audience of conservative, White voters that crime and violence is the fault of Black Americans. The goal of this study was to understand how Nixon used video production elements to augment his language surrounding dog whistle racism. The research used sociolinguistic analysis, a qualitative method of examining media, and is further situated in the method of videostyle framing. Adopting and modifying Johnston and Kaid's (2006) videostyle framing system, this research analyzed the verbal, nonverbal, and production components of Nixon's television spots. Ads that referenced law and order, even indirectly, displayed tones of "toughness" and "aggression," rather than positive ideals like "charisma" and "optimism." This research contextualizes the current applications of dog whistle racism in modern political communications.*

## I. Introduction

Accepting the Republican nomination in July of 2016, Donald Trump promised the convention he was the country's "law and order candidate." While President Trump's rhetoric proved to be more provocative than previous administrations, he adopted messages regarding crime that have been recycled by presidents from George W. Bush to Ronald Reagan.

Law and order has been a Republican Party catchphrase since the early 1960s and was largely popularized by Richard Nixon during his 1968 presidential campaign. In this election, Nixon sought to salvage his political career in the midst of nationwide Civil Rights atrocities and counter-movements. In an unprecedented fashion, Nixon and his campaign staff focused on his image, strategically tapping into the booming medium of television. Rhetoric was carefully crafted to complement this manufactured appearance, his key platform being law and order. Today, law and order is understood as dog whistle racism, a seemingly neutral phrase that is not outwardly racist, yet signals its racial implications to certain people. Dog whistles like Nixon's law and order are neatly packaged and presented as a sort of code that reaches a target audience, in this case conservative, White voters. These advertisements further send subliminal messages in their use

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of videostyle, the verbal, nonverbal, and production components that convey messages to viewers. Much like dog whistles, videostyle allows an advertisement to implicitly communicate a sentiment, often unspoken, without ever explicitly stating it.

The purpose of this research is to understand how Nixon used video production elements to augment his language surrounding dog whistle racism. Existing scholarship emphasizes Nixon's political attitudes and actions once in office, as well as his campaign's attention to his appearance on television. However, this study intends to specifically analyze these law and order television ads in order to more fully understand their racial implications in the context of 1968.

## II. Literature Review

### *Cultural Context of 1968*

The chaotic nature of 1968 cannot go overlooked, as it created the political maelstrom culminating in Nixon's presidency. One major stressor on U.S. politics and culture was the Vietnam War. Nixon's predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson, escalated U.S. involvement in the overseas conflict despite wavering public opinion. By March of 1968, he had authorized the deployment of 525,000 men as Americans increasingly disapproved of the U.S. role in the war by this time.<sup>1</sup> Because of eroding public support, Johnson announced in that same speech that he would not seek the Democratic nomination in the upcoming election.

With the lack of accountability from the White House, outcry over the ethics of waging war in Vietnam rose to the forefront of national dialogue. The primary mouthpiece of dissent was student activism. Left-leaning students protesting Vietnam proved to be a cornerstone of the larger counterculture movement evident in the 1960s, ultimately muffled by the reactionary conservatism of Nixon at the end of the decade.

In addition to growing resentment over the Vietnam War, civil rights tensions were at a climax, as "riots had grown to dominate public discourse," and media attention.<sup>2</sup> Incidents of police brutality and general civil unrest amounted to a political landscape never before experienced in the United States. The assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, revived national outrage surrounding racial injustice. Consequently, "America convulsed [and] riots broke out across the country."<sup>3</sup>

Intertwined with racial justice protests was the upheaval at the Chicago Democratic National Convention in August of 1968. By June, Sen. Robert Kennedy (brother of former president John F. Kennedy) was in position to receive the Democratic nomination. Two months before the Chicago convention, Kennedy was assassinated just hours after winning primaries in South Dakota and California. The violence and disorder at the Chicago DNC provided Nixon the perfect opportunity to preach about the country's need for law and order and establish himself as the candidate to quell the chaos.

With these events building before the November election, Nixon sought to overcome his prior political failures by reshaping his image. The new medium of television was the way to do so; in 1960, 87% of homes in the United States had a television and averaged five-and-a-half hours of viewing per day.<sup>4</sup> A previous landmark television event, Nixon's 1960 debate with John F. Kennedy, is situated in collective memory as a resounding failure. In the first presidential debate ever televised, it is misremembered that Nixon appeared sweaty and disheveled on camera, contributing to his loss in the election. In contrast, Joe McGinniss' book *The Selling of the President* offers insight on Nixon's staff and all that went into changing the politician's reputation. As McGinniss illustrates, repurposing Richard Nixon was tactical, incremental, and intentional. The tell-all suggests that throughout the campaign aides sought to avoid the facade of a new Nixon, but to show the old Nixon "with his strengths looking stronger and his negatives blurred by the years."<sup>5</sup> Scholar Jeremy Mayer's writing complements this sentiment, as he proposes that "the greatest obstacle Nixon had

1 Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks on Decision not to Seek Re-election," March 31, 1968. White House, District of Columbia, United States of America, MPEG-4, 40:38.

2 Jeremy D. Mayer, "Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory," *The Historian* 64, no. 2 (2002): 1.

3 Ted Conover, "The Strike that Brought MLK to Memphis," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January/February 2018, 77.

4 Matthew Gentzkow, "Television and Voter Turnout," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121, no. 3 (2006): 931.

5 McGinniss, 77.

to conquer... was his 'loser' image."<sup>6</sup> Though the campaign was successful, the election was extremely close, with Nixon winning the popular vote against Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey by less than one percentage point.<sup>7</sup>

### **Dog Whistle Racism**

This study focuses on the implications of a particular racial platform emerging from 1968: *law and order*. Scholars agree that law and order was a viable political strategy,<sup>8</sup> growing as a hot-button issue rivaled only by the Vietnam War and civil rights.<sup>9</sup> More notably to this research, law and order is a term unmistakably connected to dog whistle racism.

Ian Haney López's scholarship clearly articulates the definition and implications of dog whistle racism, but most importantly, its roots in the modern GOP. Haney López defines dog whistle racism as "coded talk centered on race."<sup>10</sup> Though he acknowledges it is a bipartisan tactic, he argues it is a weapon employed by Republicans in a way that is "not accidental, vestigial, or comical, and certainly not trivial."<sup>11</sup> Rather than publicly tossing around racial slurs or directly racist sentiments, phrases like "forced busing," "welfare queens," or "states' rights"—all terms popularized or repurposed in this era—are substituted to convey racist messages behind "thinly veiled references."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Professor Benjamin Bowser argues that the theoretical development of racism was still evolving, resulting in a perceived declining significance of race: "if you replace an overt system of racial hierarchy with a covert one, race's salience will appear to decline."<sup>13</sup> In this way, 1968 marked a shift towards covert racism, and a critical tactic for perpetuating this form of white supremacy was dog whistle racism.

There is no better articulation of dog whistle racism than GOP political strategist Lee Atwater's 1981 comments on the evolution Southern Strategy ultimately employed by Ronald Reagan:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "N—, n—, n—." By 1968, you can't say "n—" — that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, then we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me— because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "n—, n—."<sup>14</sup>

An understanding of dog whistle racism is critical for this research, as it frames the importance of Nixon's law and order messages and his intent to reach white voters. A platform of law and order alluded to increased policing, condemnation of Black "violence," and the prioritization of White safety without explicitly naming race. Even in the mid-60s, experts correctly identified law and order as "simply a code word for white racism,"<sup>15</sup> but as Nixon discovered, racism won votes.

As many scholars acknowledge, Nixon opted to adopt the racial tactics of candidate George Wallace, the infamous Alabama segregationist, in what became known as Nixon's Southern Strategy. Wallace

6 Mayer, 356.

7 John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "1968 Statistics," The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/1968>.

8 Lee Bernstein, "We Shall Have Order: The Cultural Politics of Law and Order," in *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 20.

9 Stephen Earl Bennet and Alfred J. Tuchfarber, "The Social-Structural Sources of Cleavage on Law and Order Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 3 (1975): 419.

10 Ian Haney López, "Introduction: Racial Politics and the Middle Class," in *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

11 Haney López, 2.

12 Haney López, 4.

13 Benjamin Bowser, "Racism: Origin and Theory," *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 6 (2017): 575.

14 Bowser, 578.

15 Bennet and Tuchfarber, 420.

“pioneered a kind of soft porn racism,”<sup>16</sup> and at the risk of losing votes to an independent candidate, Nixon “refashioned [this] racial demagoguery,”<sup>17</sup> to secure the loyalty of White conservatives—consciously racist or not. Similarly, Mayer notes his courtship of “white backlash” votes.<sup>18</sup> In the same vein, scholar Lauren Pearlman argues the platform allowed Nixon to “conflate race and crime” while his strategists “made a calculated appeal to white voters.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to absorbing Wallace’s racial politics, Nixon pulled from the playbook of Republican Barry Goldwater, who laid the foundation of Americans’ obsession with law and order during his 1964 presidential campaign.<sup>20</sup> Goldwater’s narrative targeted “crime and social chaos” during the height of Cold War anxieties,<sup>21</sup> when obsession with national security translated to a fixation on “restor[ing] a sense of security and social order,” domestically.<sup>22</sup> Law and order was a strategy of political backlash that promised to restore safety for private citizens—or more accurately, White citizens.

Scholars also agree that law and order was the key platform attracting these reactionary and conservative voters to Nixon, simultaneously distancing Black and liberal votes. Nixon quickly co-opted the issue of law and order in an unprecedented fashion,<sup>23</sup> making it “the rhetoric of his campaign,” as well as “the cornerstone of his first term.”<sup>24</sup> Haney López, in his historical tracing of Republican racial politics, described the platform as follows:

Ultimately, the language of law and order justified a more quiet form of violence in defense of the racial status quo, replacing lynchings and mass arrests for trespassing and delinquency. By the mid-1960s, “law and order” had become a surrogate expression for concern about the civil rights movement.<sup>25</sup>

Despite white anxieties, crime rates were not any more statistically concerning than previous years, with only one percent of the population becoming victims of violent crime.<sup>26</sup> More specifically, the murder rate was one one-hundredth of that,<sup>27</sup> so the types of criminal activity targeted by law and order were far less pervasive than indicated. Therefore, the law and order platform sensationalized crime to covertly criminalize “political progress, urban riots, and... challenges to the status quo.”<sup>28</sup>

Historians overwhelmingly acknowledge that law and order was conceptualized by White Republicans to maliciously and covertly criminalize Black Americans. A 1975 study presented data demonstrating that “law and order and feelings about Blacks [were] inextricably interwoven,”<sup>29</sup> meaning the platform directly tapped into white anxieties and promised a tough stance on law enforcement across the country. As Mayer writes, and as is crucial for this research, “the role law and order played in Nixon’s victory cannot be underestimated.”<sup>30</sup> Nixon acknowledged this himself, famously saying: “it’s all about law and order and the damn Negro-Puerto Rican groups out there.”<sup>31</sup> This unapologetic emphasis on law and order gave Nixon a platform to stand on and reason for voters to listen. Nixon understood the racial implications of his law-and-order platform and chose to implement it despite the harm it would bring to Black Americans.

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16 Ian Haney López, “The GOP’s Rise as ‘the White Man’s Party,’” in *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

17 Haney López, 17.

18 Mayer, 356.

19 Pearlman, 146.

20 May, 945.

21 May, 946.

22 May, 945.

23 Lauren Pearlman, “D.C. Should Not Stand for Disorder and Crime: Richard Nixon’s Law-and-Order Campaign,” in *Democracy’s Capital: Black Political Power in Washington, D.C., 1960s-1970s* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 140.

24 Bernstein, 19.

25 Haney López, 24.

26 May, 944.

27 May, 944.

28 May, 944.

29 Bennet and Tuchfarber, 425.

30 Mayer, 361.

31 Haney López, 24.

### III. Methods

The following methodology aims to answer this research question:

*RQ: How do Nixon's 1968 campaign television ads utilize videostyle to communicate dog whistles in a law-and-order context?*

This research was conducted as sociolinguistic analysis, a qualitative method of examining media,<sup>32</sup> further situated within the field of *videostyle framing* established by Johnston and Kaid's 2006 study.<sup>33</sup> Although videostyle coding has been a popular model for analyzing political ads for over twenty years,<sup>34</sup> Johnston and Kaid created a detailed framework in their research discerning image-centered presidential ads from policy ads. This analysis method is likewise applicable to Nixon's ads, as it emphasizes the examination of verbal, nonverbal, and production components. This method allows for the appropriate consideration to both text and imagery that may accompany law and order and employ dog whistle racism. Given the subtle nature of dog whistle racism, nonverbal and production components are equally important, if not more so, than the narration in these ads. Camera angles, the composition of still photos, and editing techniques can all strengthen the covert nature of dog whistle racism. In this way, Johnston and Kaid's framing methodology will help contextualize law and order.

This specific framework is supported by other research in the field—Valeria Sulfaro acknowledges the importance of semantics and visual imagery to cue voters and convey messages.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Angelos Kissas reiterates the importance of production strategies that are detailed in Johnston and Kaid's research: *cinéma-vérité* (literally “truthful cinema,” a French method that emphasizes realism) and *neutral reporter format*, where an “independent speaker-observer” narrates.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the importance of videostyle and production, both Sulfaro and Kissas further validate advertisements' impact on viewers. Sulfaro's writing describes the schema—or mental shortcuts for decision-making—that voters form to make judgments about candidates. She states that ads employ specific videostyle that “can evoke associations” regarding political issues, policies, and platforms without being specific.<sup>37</sup> Much like Sulfaro's research, Kissas proposes that political ads are “schematically morphed” to reach viewers.<sup>38</sup> While political ads may seem to be composed of simple text and imagery, they are crafted to align with certain schema that voters have previously developed. Furthermore, research shows that voters learn more about political issues from television ads than from televised news or debates,<sup>39</sup> and while certain advertisements may be perceived as attacks, negative ads have been confirmed to influence viewers' voting preferences.<sup>40</sup>

This research was conducted using a sample of 21 television commercials, 10 from Museum of the Moving Image's “Living Room Candidate”<sup>41</sup> database and 11 from the Congressional Archives of the University of Oklahoma's Carl Albert Center.<sup>42</sup> These 21 ads represent all of the relevant Nixon spots from 1968 available on both databases. While there were dozens of regional variations of the same Nixon commercials aired, these spots were selected because of their accessibility and the variety of topics they represent. The individual ads range in length, topic, and campaign platforms, including titles like “The First Civil Right,” “Order,” and “Vietnam.”

After acquiring the sample of commercials, a preliminary viewing was conducted to sort the spots into three categories based on their likelihood to display dog whistles. These watch-throughs were conducted to identify the main topic of the advertisement, as well as discern any initial dog whistle calls. Category One, ads mentioning law and order or those with racial references, contained seven ads. Category Two was

32 Jack Rosenberry and Lauren A. Vicker, “Qualitative Research Methods,” in *Applied Mass Communication Theory: A Guide for Media Practitioners*, ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 228.

33 Anne Johnston and Lynda Lee Kaid, “Image Ads and Issue Ads in U.S. Presidential Advertising: Using Videostyle to Explore Stylistic Differences in Televised Political Ads From 1952 to 2000,” in *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 2 (2006): 284.

34 Johnston and Kaid, “Using Videostyle,” 285.

35 Sulfaro, 89.

36 Kissas, 395.

37 Sulfaro, 82.

38 Kissas, 394.

39 Johnston and Kaid, 20.

40 Johnston and Kaid, 23.

41 Museum of the Moving Image, “The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2020,” Database, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/>.

42 Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma, “Congressional Archives Carl Albert Center,” Database, <http://www.ou.edu/carlalbertcenter.html>.



designated for the five ads that potentially included dog whistles verbally or visually but would require closer analysis. Category Three was the group of spots that did not appear to make any reference to law and order or any subliminal racialized message. This sorting was not part of the formal coding process, but to aid the researcher in focusing on racial themes and the presence of dog whistles.

The coding process was conducted using an adjusted version of the codesheet created by Johnston and Kaid. Detailing more than 50 questions, the codesheet focused on all production components of the ad, like camera angles, live sound, and rhetorical appeals. Because their study focused on image versus issue commercials, the codesheet was modified and refined for Nixon and the tactics often used in his specific campaign. A few questions specific to Nixon and dog whistles were added, including questions about indirect references to law and order and the presence of non-White people and their role on-screen.

## IV. Findings

### ***Common Strategies in Law and Order Advertisements***

The seven spots identified as containing dog whistles in the preliminary sorting stage revealed several consistent strategies related to law and order. The production elements were fairly consistent, as four of these ads used a compilation of still photographs, rather than the video footage that is standard in contemporary commercials. These series of photos are connected by sharp zooming and panning, creating not only a sense of motion, but emotion. Using these jarring movements not only dramatizes the subjects but builds a sense of chaos and anxiety, contributing to the fear tactic which conveys the need for law and order. By flashing pictures of screaming liberal protestors, cities in ruin, and handcuffed criminals all in less than one second, Nixon's law and order advertisements feel fast-paced and turbulent in a way that reinforces his presidency as a solution.

Two of the remaining ads, those using video, were interview-style footage of constituents describing their political concerns and how Nixon will remedy them. Very simplistic in production, these spots feature head-on video of exclusively White Americans discussing the political climate and Nixon's qualifications for office. While both end with brief, documentary-style footage of Nixon speaking to a crowd, his time on-screen is limited to just a few seconds. Only four spots of the entire research sample included video of Nixon, though none of these clips were footage of Nixon speaking directly to the camera or with other individuals. If video footage of Nixon appeared in an ad, it had narration or music overlaid, not his voice. The rest of his appearances were merely through still photographs. This aligns with previous literature that campaign staff hoped to reduce Nixon's time on-screen in an effort to reshape his image.

The tone across law and order advertisements was also consistent. The ads that referenced law and order, even indirectly, displayed tones of "toughness" and "aggression," rather than positive ideals like "charisma" and "optimism." Nixon was not known for charm, and this group of seven ads reflect his strategy of employing a stern and serious tone to warn voters about the dangers of rampant crime and a lack of order. Conversely, the ads lacking traces of dog whistles were more likely to present these more positive ideals about hope for America's future.

### ***Presence of Non-White People in Nixon Ads***

Statistically, roughly half of the 21 total ads depicted non-White-appearing individuals—the researcher coded 10 ads including photo or video of non-White people, 10 with only White people, and one ad as uncertain. Additionally, images of individuals who appeared to be an ethnicity other than White only appeared in still photos, never video footage. It must be noted that this question of non-White presence required the discretion of the researcher, who acknowledges that it is short-sighted to assume a person's race based solely on appearance. However, the question was intentionally phrased to encompass all ethnicities and gauge the visual components of dog whistle racism. While dog whistle racism in the context of 1968 was largely reduced to racism against Black Americans, the researcher hoped to acknowledge any ethnicity outside of White and how it might be visually depicted.

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Of the seven ads sorted into Category One of dog whistles, four included photos of non-White people. This group of ads most directly addressed law and order, and seemed to depict non-White people with negative connotations. Both "The First Civil Right" and "Failure" use the same image of a liberal protest, where several Black and non-White Americans appear in the crowd surrounding a sign that reads "independent socialism," (Figure 1). In 1968, socialism was largely considered a seditious threat to democracy, so to associate the sentiment with Black Americans is not incidental. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, opposition from the right often used anti-communist sentiments to discredit progress for racial equality, particularly in the South where desegregation was conflated with an "outside, communist agenda."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, socialism was commonly equated with communist or Marxist ideology in the public mind, so Nixon's choice to depict non-White Americans next to this banner is a subtle, but powerful message.



Figure 1, "The First Civil Right," and "Failure"

"Crime" uses several blurred, hectic stills to place non-White people in the center of violence and chaos. Viewers see what appears to be an alleyway fight between two Black men, shortly followed by an image of a young Black man who is unconscious, or perhaps dead (Figure 2). While both images are ambiguous and disorienting, it nevertheless seems to centralize anyone other than White Americans at the heart of crime, violence, and dissent. Later in the ad, Nixon asserts that "we owe it to the decent and law-abiding citizens" to reduce crime and danger. At "decent," and "law-abiding," two different faces of White citizens appear, but just afterwards, a Black woman's portrait takes up the screen. There is no overt language that says White Americans are decent and law-abiding citizens and non-White Americans are not, but this editing decision is notable.



Figure 2, "Crime"

There are more explicit commentaries on non-White Americans, like the image of a line of handcuffed criminals includes as many as two non-White detainees, holding their handcuffed hands in front of their face in shame. While the portrayal of Black and non-White Americans in Nixon's ads cannot be categorized as blatantly racist, the subtle editing decisions align with the covert nature of dog whistles.

The spots that only slightly referenced law and order, or those that did not mention it at all, seemed to portray racial and ethnic minorities in a more positive light. These images of non-White Americans were neutral, if not positive connotations. The people featured in both footage and photos were still overwhelmingly White, but featured racial and ethnic minorities in roles outside of poverty and crime. Examples of a more neutral depiction are in "Unite," a portrait of a Black man in a construction hat smiling at the camera, and later showing a wide shot of a racially diverse crowd. Positive depictions include two young, presumably Black scientists in separate ads: a woman in a lab studying test tubes in "Youth," (Figure 3) and a man in "Wrong Road" who appears to be an engineer or technician. Although several ads showed non-White individuals outside of a disparaging law and order context, these positive depictions indicate that Nixon's campaign had at least some awareness of the role racial minorities already played in American society.



Figure 3, "Youth"

### **Other Themes in Dog Whistle Ads**

The remaining advertisements containing dog whistles used similar production techniques that created patterns among Nixon's spots. A cumulative 12 ads made up the first two categories of preliminary coding, meaning they either contained notable dog whistles or potentially used dog whistles. Only three of these used video footage, the rest were comprised of still photos. In comparison to the ads that relied on photographs, those that used video offered very simplistic editing with no notable production effects. For example, "Lawless Society" contained verbal dog whistles like Nixon's promise to "restore respect for law," or the title's disparaging allusion to Johnson's Great Society, though it consisted of one video clip slowly zooming out from a flashing light atop a police car. In contrast, the rest of the ads that employed dog whistles in some capacity were created using a heavily edited sequence of photos. These series of photos were often linked together with cuts of varying speed. Most notably, different photos quickly cut to the next in a matter of seconds, often creating a fast-paced ad with a sense of anxiety or panic.

"Convention" is perhaps the best example, a spot that contains no narration and only the soundtrack of the song "Hot Time," a popular marching tune that evokes a patriotic tone. The spot is meant to criticize Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey, as his smiling face is juxtaposed with documentary photography illustrating the violent and lawless aspects of American society. The famous tune breaks down into a discordant wailing as the same photo of Humphrey is mirrored back and forth at least six times in two seconds before his portrait devolves into the photos of violent protests. The march revives as Humphrey appears again, this time his image shaking back and forth horizontally before cutting to a still photo of American soldiers huddled behind a barrier in Vietnam. The production effects mimic an explosion, as if the soldiers are ducking from a bomb. While Nixon's advertisements often used video footage in simplistic ways, the editing used to link still photographs boast high-quality production that accompanies their subtle use of dog whistles.



The title of one ad, “The First Civil Right,” is a dog whistle of sorts, implying that safety is the real concern and Civil Rights protests for racial equity are secondary or frivolous. Regarding safety, a primary concern in Nixon ads was the perceived threat to the safety of White women. The photo of a fair-skinned mannequin lying broken in a dark alley in “The First Civil Right” was a more indirect allusion to this theme, but “Concerns” and “Wisconsin Concerns” feature two different White women offering interviews of nearly identical sentiment. An older housewife states that she “[doesn’t] feel safe in [her] own kitchen unless the front door is locked” and a young Milwaukee mother doesn’t “even feel safe in [her] own house,” when her husband is away. Both statements indicate that the lack of order in the U.S. and seemingly pervasive crime inherently poses a threat to the safety of White women. There are no racial references made, but the subliminal meaning of the dialogue suggests that White women become victims, whereas Americans of other races pose the threat.

The other consistent theme across the ads containing dog whistles was the repeated mention of crime. As mentioned in prior literature, crime rates and the occurrence of violent crime was sensationalized under the law-and-order message. However, violence and crime were consistently mentioned to posit the lack of order throughout the country. “Crime,” “Wrong Road,” and “Decision,” all describe the violent and dangerous state of America, offering Nixon as the solution to “rebuilt respect for the law.” With crime as the natural antagonist for a law and order candidate, Nixon aimed to address it.

## V. Discussion

With a historical perspective, this research sought to understand why 1968 was an opportune time for dog whistles to resonate with voters. Fundamentally, the 1968 election was crucial because it marked the peak of growing disapproval of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson’s administration increasingly escalated the American presence in the conflict, which also instigated youth and liberal protests about conscripting young men and the ethics of the war. These protests often coalesced with those for Civil Rights and other qualms of the youngest generation, allowing the right to conflate all of these sentiments as anarchical protests that stood to endanger American society at large. Nixon and other conservatives saw the Vietnam War as squandered power and resources by way of ineffective military operations. Regardless of political affiliation, many Americans were unhappy with their country’s role in Vietnam.

Furthermore, the election was an example of a conservative, reactionary response to a decidedly progressive incumbent. Johnson’s presidency touted substantial liberal legislation. The Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, as well as other social welfare and environmental reforms, were considered to be some of the most progressive moves in U.S. history. Naturally, more moderate and conservative Americans were inclined to support a candidate that would maintain or reinstate traditional values. This was the ideal environment for dog whistles. Johnson had passed sweeping racial legislation, meaning Nixon’s dog whistles could entice voters who resented this progress. Without needing to be overtly racist, Nixon could pose law and order as not only a solution to the social leap by Black Americans, but a remedy to the violent and chaotic leftist protests.

In addition, the television boom of this era allowed campaign messages to reach voters in a new, effective manner. As TV became ubiquitous in the American household, campaign advertisements and broadcast content reached a massive number of voters in their living rooms. Though it was still a growing medium, even the most basic campaign ads proved effective in influencing voters to align with the candidates themselves and their policy second. In this way, Nixon’s use of videostyle in advertisements is directly linked to previous scholarship. Sulfaro indicates that specific visual tactics can “evoke associations”<sup>44</sup> to policy or political issues for viewers. Further, Kissas notes that these visual or production techniques can communicate “a template of shared values” to those watching.<sup>45</sup> Many of the observed strategies in Nixon ads—discordant music, aggressive frame cropping, and rapid cuts—evoke an association of chaos. By repeating visual strategies of quick cuts between photos or depicting liberal protests as violent, Nixon is able to disseminate cues about law and order and its racial implications without requiring critical examination from voters. These production techniques form templates about the country’s lack of order that voters can recognize across

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44 Sulfaro, 82.

45 Kissas, 388.

campaign ads, allowing them to grasp these indirect references to law and order. These visual patterns serve as shortcuts to inform voters of Nixon's platforms without requiring explicit explanations. Dog whistles also achieve this mental signaling to the groups they are targeting. When Nixon uses a serious, aggressive tone or asserts the rising crime rates, he subtly but effectively conveys that law and order is the only solution for safety.

Nixon's law and order advertisements revealed patterns and similarities in both content and production. The majority of spots were comprised entirely of still photos that used complex editing techniques to create a sense of motion or specific emotional tones, often fear or anxiety. The intricacies of these ads with documentary photography were more nuanced and required analysis that considered the visuals and production themselves as dog whistles. Those that consisted of video footage were more simplistic in nature, more often using verbal dog whistles rather than visual. When video was used, Nixon rarely appeared in it. In the four advertisements containing video of Nixon, live audio of his voice was not present; narration or music was overlaid instead. Nixon seldom made appearances in his ads at all, predominantly by way of still photos. Though Nixon did have air time and his recorded narration was a common component of the ads, it appears the production was crafted to avoid him speaking on-screen when possible. This limited time on-screen aligns with existing literature and internal campaign memos that aimed to reshape his image.

In addition to patterns in production, ads with commentary on law and order demonstrated consistent thematic content. While some advertisements directly referenced lawlessness or a lack of order, the mention of crime was a common, indirect reference to the law and order platform. By citing the rise of crime and its threat of violence, Nixon not only implied the nation's need for law and order but offered justification for the policy.

## VI. Conclusion

The goal of this research was to contextualize the use of video production elements and dog whistle racism in Richard Nixon's campaign advertisements. By assessing Nixon's political career before the 1968 election, the cultural tensions caused by Civil Rights and Vietnam protests, and the rise of television, dog whistle racism connects the political landscape of the 1968 election and the influence of television advertisements on voters. Throughout the 21 ads coded, videostyle techniques and dog whistles converged in Nixon's law and order platform, strategically conflating crime rates and perpetuating anxiety about the lack of order across the United States.

The main limitation of this research was the focus on television advertising rather than other campaign materials like radio and print ads or speeches. The spots analyzed in this study averaged a length of about one minute, meaning rhetoric is more condensed in comparison to long-form materials. Additionally, the quality of the footage made some coding difficult. Without archival access, the available video preserved from 1968 was sometimes flawed, which a study of more contemporary campaigns would circumvent. Regardless of its limitations, this research contributes to the fields of political communication and videostyle framing in an effort to better understand the covert nature of dog whistles and their evolution since the early 1960s. Further research in this field could form a comparative analysis of dog whistles and videostyle between Nixon and Trump ads. While the style of advertisements has evolved since 1968, spots from 2016 likely contain similar strategies evaluated in this research.

History demonstrates that while dog whistles were an effective rhetorical strategy in the post-Civil Rights era, they continue to be employed well into the twenty-first century. Donald Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaigns brought discussions of dog whistle racism beyond academia and into public discourse. The former president is known for tweets and speeches that disregarded political correctness, even stepping beyond dog whistles to make explicitly racist statements. Trump's 2017 Muslim ban and repeated references to Islamic terrorism brought media attention to his reliance on dog whistles. While Trump is a more extreme example, this harmful speech connects to the subtler rhetoric of Nixon and Ronald Reagan. After receiving an unsolicited endorsement from the Ku Klux Klan in 1980, Reagan delivered a speech at a Mississippi county fair invoking "states' rights" for the first time during his campaign. He later used epithets of "welfare queens" and "strapping young bucks" as dog whistles intended to criticize social welfare policy.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, this research is not merely a static case study of 1968, but a relevant assessment of modern political communication.

46 Joseph Crespino, "Did David Brooks Tell the Full Story About Reagan's Neshoba County Fair Visit?" History News Network, 2007, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/44535>.

Furthermore, this form of racism goes beyond any political affiliation or campaign; it is about justifying the policing of Black Americans. Law and order promised to maintain the status quo by increasing law enforcement, but a crackdown on crime meant justifying the policing of Black bodies in particular. Nixon's commitment to law and order led him to sign legislation permitting no-knock warrants in the early days of the War on Drugs, allowing police to forcibly enter homes unannounced. This exact legislation was used in March of 2020 to justify the murder of Breonna Taylor, who was shot six times in her bed after police battered down her door. The consequences of law and order still impact the contemporary political and cultural atmosphere, but most importantly, overwhelmingly falls on the shoulders of Black Americans.

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