

Bush's Sweet Talk

By Deborah Tannen

WASHINGTON
It's government's role to create an environment where everyone can dream and flourish. "The purpose of prosperity is to make the American dream touch every willing heart." "The greatness of America is found in the loving and generous hearts of its people."

What is this? An inspirational speech from a New Age guru? No, it's a plea for campaign contributions from georgewbush.com. Why all these "hearts" and "dreams" on a political Web site? That's what I wondered,

Seeking women's votes with an emotional lexicon.

until I realized the answer: to appeal to women voters — not through policy proposals to better women's lives, but through emotional language designed to win their "hearts."

Perhaps I should have anticipated this in 1997, when the pollster Frank Luntz gave Republican members of Congress a memo called "Language of the 21st Century." It said that Republicans need not "change our substance or create a separate women's agenda" because "listening to women and adapting a new language and a

Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown, is the author of "The Argument Culture."

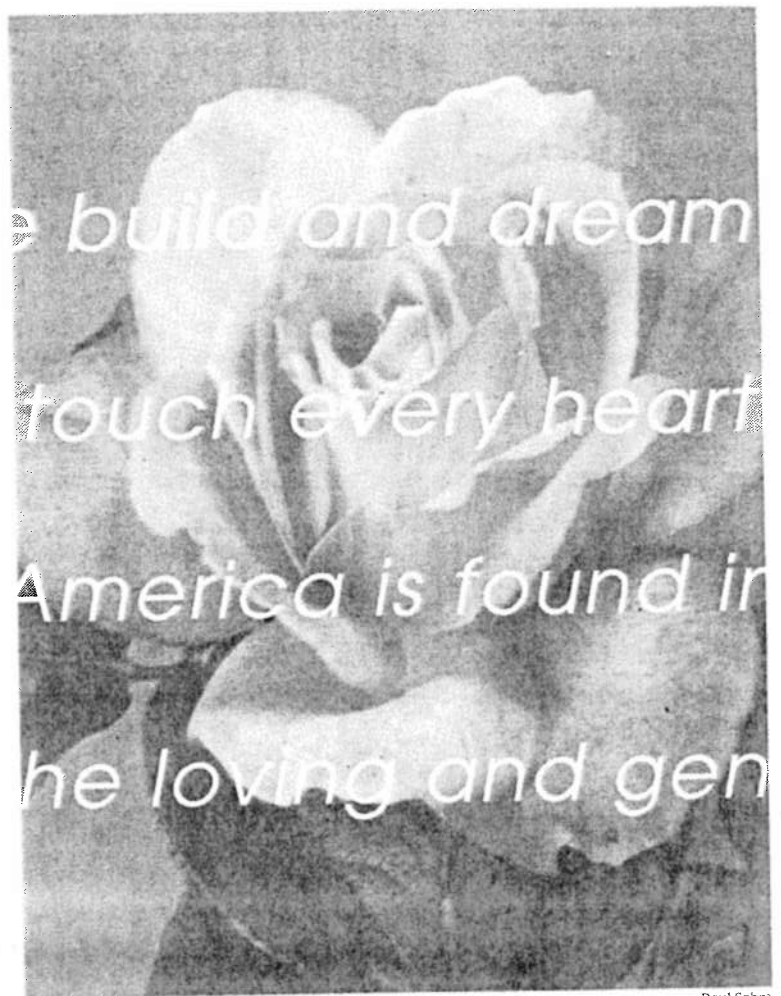
more friendly style will itself be rewarded." Although Mr. Luntz isn't one of his advisers, George W. Bush seems to have absorbed the lesson.

Foremost among women-friendly words is "children." In a speech on tax cuts last month, Mr. Bush managed to work in "child" or "children" 11 times. In a speech on faith-based initiatives last summer, it was a dozen times. In a talk in New Hampshire in November, children recur like a mantra 35 times (not counting "kids" and "students"). Yes, the topic was education, which is, after all, about children. But the repetition was striking, and the speech also contained a dizzying array of other emotion-laden words: seven "loves," nine "hopes," three "dreams" and three "hearts."

It's not only the speeches on education that are studded with hearts. Speaking on farm policy in Iowa, Mr. Bush called agriculture "the heart of our economy." Regarding Veterans Day, he told a New Hampshire audience that we must impart veterans' stories to the next generation to "raise a monument in their hearts." The speech on faith-based groups contained 7 "hearts" and 11 "loves."

Mr. Bush's education speech showed another strategy in appealing to women: first stir up fears, then lure the listener with talk of hopes and dreams. (Fear is "a very salable commodity," according to the Luntz memo.) Mr. Bush told the crowd, "In an American school year there are more than 4,000 rapes or cases of sexual battery, 7,000 robberies and 11,000 physical attacks." Then he went on: "Safety and discipline are essential. But when we dream for our children, we dream with higher goals. We want them to love learning."

Like a computer-composed symphony, that speech reached a crescendo of emotional notes: "our problems as a nation . . . will only be solved by a



Paul Sahré

transformation of the heart and will. This is why a hopeful and decent future is found in hopeful and decent children." (Very good: one "heart," two "hopes," one "children.")

Of course, politicians have always talked about dreams and children, but none of the other current candidates are doing so with anything near Mr. Bush's intensity. And while Bill Clinton has always used words for emo-

tional impact, in the case of women he has done so to gain support for concrete proposals to improve their lives.

The Pavlovian view of women voters — plug the words in, and they will respond — sends a chill down my spine because it sounds like an adaptation of something I have written about communication between the sexes: When a woman tells a man about a problem, she doesn't want him to fix it; she just wants him to listen and let her know he understands. But there's a difference between a private conversation and a presidential election, between what we want from our lovers and what we want from our leaders.

Evidence of this distinction may be showing up in recent polls: According to Zogby International, Mr. Bush's lead among Republican women nationwide has dipped from 66 percent in October to 56 percent in January; in New Hampshire, he now trails Senator John McCain — who has made little effort to sound woman-friendly — among women likely to vote in the G.O.P. primary.

Women may not want their men to solve all their personal problems, but solving the nation's problems is, after all, what we elect our leaders to do. □