

From Lincoln and Twain to Obama and Ward

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American political rhetoric can be traced to a few primary sources - Mark Twain, Will Rogers and Abraham Lincoln, for instance.

Even Lincoln was known to crib a line or two from Shakespeare.

So you can empathize a bit with former Republican congressional candidate Vaughn Ward. If he wasn't done in before it arrived, a video showing him stealing lines from President Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address devastated Ward's prospects.

Whether you saw it on the Internet or via the mainstream media - one Boise television station ran it as the lead item on its pre-Election Day broadcast and "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno also highlighted the piece - its effects were profound.

Leading into the final voting, Ward was running close with state Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Eagle, the underfunded challenger who clinched last week the right to challenge U.S. Rep. Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, in November.

Absentee balloting - in which people could have voted as early as 45 days ahead of the election - had Labrador narrowly running ahead in Ada County. On Election Day, after the video had been widely distributed, Labrador picked up the state's largest county by almost a two-to-one margin.

Ward won the absentee vote in places like Clearwater County, only to lose the final outcome there. Ward stayed ahead in Latah County, but his margin narrowed considerably on Election Day.

Were his actions so awful?

Ward borrowed a few phrases from Obama about a better tomorrow ahead and the nation facing a crossroads. Truth be told, Obama probably cribbed some of that stuff himself. How could he not? There is only so much material. Everybody lifts, embellishes and paraphrases from it. Even former movie actor Ronald Reagan was not shy about appropriating lines from movie scripts. Of course, when the former president uttered the phrase "Make my day," attribution to Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry character wasn't necessary. Everybody knew what Reagan was up to.

What has Ward upset is the splicing and editing legislative candidate Lucas Baumbach of Boise used to create the video. Baumbach conceded it was a piece of political "propaganda."

"It wasn't true," Ward says.

Enough of it was, however.

Ward's problem - with proper credit to author Sebastian Junger - was he faced a perfect storm. He'd been tagged plagiarizing material from other Republican congressional offices and campaigns for his website

issue positions. Next, he was caught echoing Obama, hardly a popular figure among the Republican electorate who would decide the congressional primary election. Had the video shown him stealing Reagan's words and had it been an isolated event, it would have been laughed off.

Don't forget the medium beyond this message. In years past, putting together a clever video that resonated with voters required someone with technical expertise and access to expensive equipment to produce it. Plus you needed money to get the spot on television.

Baumbach's effort represented the antithesis of that scenario. Video technology has become democratized. The Internet offered a free, independent means of delivering that message.

All the better that mainstream media picked up on it.

Those elements ganged up on Ward, making him its first victim in an Idaho election.

Odds are he won't be the last. - M.T.