

# The Value and Character of Music as a Tool for Political Mobilization

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**Abstract:** Music itself has no practical meaning. However, music can be given political meaning by politicians to some extent. This paper will analyze the particularity and value of music in mobilizing political movements from the Iraq War and Vietnam War.

## 1 Introduction

It is believed that music itself had no practical meaning [2], that is, it is meaningless to do with religion, race and environmental occasions. Besides, Pop music itself has a certain emotional power, can be used as a means to shape the collective atmosphere. Therefore, it is more important to investigate the effect of music on political movements, rather than the specific content and genres of these songs. In the United States, from the point of view of war, music can be a means to increase the cohesion and solidarity of the military, or it can be a channel to get people to resonate and stop the war. From the perspective of political election, music is a means for politicians to convey political strategies, and it can also be a bridge to gain public support through celebrity politics. In this way, the meaning of music in politics is given by politicians. Specifically, music has multiple meanings, both provocative and contradictory, based on multiple themes. Therefore, this article will analyze the specificity and value of music in mobilizing political movements, from analyzing the wars include the Iraq war and Vietnam War and several examples in American presidential election.

## 2 The value and embodiment of music in American war

Music, as a form of communication, is symbolic, so music, like language symbols, is endowed with multiple meanings. As it was said [10], music composers cannot completely control the meaning of music expression, that is, once music has audience and enters the world of public discourse, the meaning of music will be shaped by the audience. American military history has proved that music has the characteristics of inspiring soldiers to fight. In the Iraq war, music had a close relationship with the U.S. military in Iraq, because the development of new technology and the global popularity of music enabled music to play a positive role in military deployment [11].

Specifically, music could be used to cover up the sound of soldiers' location, such as helicopters and explosive devices, which can protect soldiers from the sight of the enemy to a large extent and has a good combat effect. In addition, the U.S. military has installed audio and communication systems in tanks, allowing soldiers to listen to music while on patrol to relieve the tension and stress caused by the war and become the source of inspiration for soldiers. In contrast, since the 1960s, there has been protest music in the United States, with rock music from the Vietnam War as a typical example. It can be said that the Vietnam War was the first rock 'n' roll war in the history of the United States. Rock 'n' roll was a rebellious force that cured the confused American soldiers and spread anti-war slogans to all parts of the country. In the end, the counterculture, mainly rock music, defeated the political appeal of the American government, influenced the public's perception of the war and social injustice, and to a large extent led to the failure of the United States in the Vietnam War [13]. This part will investigate the reflection and value of music as a kind of benign and malignant political mobilization in the American war by specifically analyzing the Iraq war and the Vietnam war.

### 2.1 Music in the Iraq war: a source of combat inspiration.

In American military history, military radio broadcasts often played songs that were patriotic or inspired to fight, and the U.S. government believed that music could keep soldiers' morale up and ease tensions. During the Iraq war, American soldiers listened to music before leaving their military bases to patrol, and metal and hip-hop were often their preferred musical genres. To some extent, music, as the inspiration for combat, is related to listening to music during patrol, because listening to music during the execution of tasks could make people highly alert and focused. Thus, communication mode between people is more through music, which greatly reduces language communication and enhances attention

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in combat. Soundtracks In War [14], shows the sense of participation of music among young American soldiers, as well as the positive effect of music on War. At the 0:40 in this video, one of the soldiers said, 'playing heavy metal music before we go out'. The heavy metal music acts to get rid of the psychological barrier for the soldiers in the combat and stimulates the progress of the battle. Also, two young soldiers in the video were playing folk music with guitars to express their homesickness and arouse their desire to finish the battle quickly and successfully. Some black soldiers used hip-hop lyrics to express their strong desire to win, and the frequent use of bullets, war and enemies in the lyrics was undoubtedly a catalyst for the promotion of combat inspiration. In addition, [11] also describes the positive effect of music on war mobilization through interviews with American soldiers involved in the Iraq war. Among them, soldiers take part in special musical rituals as they inspire the fight. For example, the song I Don't Give a Fuck, written by Lil John, was the popular track when the soldiers left the camp, they also play the song until they lose control and scream. This is reasonable, because war is out of control, and the process of combat requires great vigilance, so soldiers need to be excited. In this way, by playing a song loudly and rudely over and over again, they gain the positive power of the song and are more likely to stay excited and ready for battle. Thus, music could unite a type of people, that is, to increase the sense of team in the army, which is crucial [12]. By performing the particular song together in the same space, soldiers create a common consciousness through their common actions, namely war mobilization.

## **2.2 Music in the Vietnam war: mobilizing people to protest and stop the war**

During the Vietnam War, the radio stations of the armed forces were closely related to the lives of soldiers and the source of their music. During the political and social revolutions of the 1960s, the counterculture in America was revived within the rock and roll genre to represent the political protest of social change. Folk music, with simple materials and straightforward lyrics, tells of real life, difficult political times and public struggles. With the continuing escalation of the Vietnam war, citizens and soldiers in the war of hostility is very strong, rock music as rebel force has become typical of an American counterculture, during the Vietnam war, rock songs reflect the love and sex, to a great extent, restricts the U.S. government launched the war mobilization strength [13]. For example, Pete Seeger, a communist music composer, he created a song called Waist Deep in The Big Muddy during the Vietnam War period which was extremely dark and ironic. The song tells the story of an army crossing a river in 1942. The captain thinks that the river is very shallow, so long as you plunge into it, you can surely wade across. In the lyrics, even if some people doubt, 'with all this equipment/ no man will be able to swim', the captain still opposes, 'all we need is a little determination'. Finally the captain himself was swallowed by deep water, the others were able to turn

around in time. This song was already a strong reflection of the Vietnam War, but in 1969, after Pete Seeger sang the song outside the White House, he added, 'every time I read the newspaper/I think of the story', it seems to be a direct expression of my disaffection with the Vietnam War. In addition, as rock music spread the idea of peace to the American masses, millions of young people played the slogan "love and peace" at the Woodstock music festival to express the idea that the younger generation in America hates war. The rock music referred to in [6] as a channel to unite the collective was intended to create a public consciousness during the Vietnam War, as a means of controlling and organizing a series of political mobilization. Finally, in 1973, the American government was forced to sign a series of peace agreements. Rock music, as a channel for the peaceful groups in the United States to spread love and peace, gained the resonance of the general public through music.

## **3 The value and embodiment of music in the United States presidential campaign**

The image of a politician is usually shaped by the voice that is exposed to the public [1], while music is symbolic and therefore given different meanings in different scenes. In addition, the emotional power contained in pop music can bring the audience into a specific scene [4], while compared with other types of music, pop music has a wider audience and familiar songs can build a sense of teamwork in the crowd. Throughout the history of the United States presidential election, President Franklin Roosevelt selected the appropriate music to express his political campaign mode, to attract the public's mood, to improve competitiveness during the campaign, President Barack Obama as an African-American presidential candidate, in the public performances, supporting and representing black rap music, to express his desire to redefine the image of black Americans and identity, attracted a large number of black voters. As a result, the campaign songs became the bridge of the American politicians and voters, expressed the politician's political demands, and also attracted the corresponding to the audience at the same time [13]. Besides, due to the development of modern science and technology and new media, music is not only the approach as a politician express his inner political mode during the election, but also the expression of a celebrity politic, that is, campaign songs contribute to the politicians to build celebrity influence to expand their visibility, to mobilize and guide the choice of voters finally. In other words, American politicians realize the importance of media in self-expression and public opinion formation, and celebrities in music, as objects of media attention and personal pursuit, will become an important part of politicians' election campaign [15]. This part will focus on the background of American presidential election and analyze the value of music, especially pop music in

expressing political mode and music as the embodiment of celebrity culture.

### **3.1 Music in conveying political strategies and mobilizing voters**

The music of the American presidential campaign is an important part of a candidate's campaign, containing the political model and history, and helps to present an idealized politician [3]. In the United States, the use of campaign music is also influenced by the leadership style. For example, the campaign songs of the Democratic Party usually reflect the role of the people in national politics, while the campaign songs of the Republican Party emphasize authoritative and capable leaders [8]. Franklin Roosevelt, a democratic candidate, used Milton Ager and Jack Yellen's popular song, *Happy Days are Here Again*, in his presidential campaign to express his political vision for an era of happiness for the American people after the crisis of the great depression. It is worth mentioning that when the song was released, the country's economy was experiencing unprecedented prosperity. In the lyrics, *You Cares and Troubles are Gone*, the optimistic mood after encountering setbacks could not make the American voters resonate with it. Therefore, President Roosevelt's election process was not optimistic in the beginning. However, in 1932, when the happiness and joy of the American people were shattered by the economic depression a few years before, the song's lyrics about the troubles of the past and its optimism for the future became emblematic of Roosevelt's political strategy. During his election campaign, the lyrics of *Happy Days are Here Again* were not altered to highlight the candidate's identity or name, but instead followed him on live shows and radio shows. Starting in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt founded the New Deal coalition, which appealed to urban citizens and intellectual conservatives. In this way, to win over these target groups, Roosevelt's campaign chose to use popular music to convey political messages to members of the New Deal. In other words, the expression of annoyance and the optimistic hope in the lyrics expressed the future of the United States that Roosevelt wanted to portray as the democratic candidate, which to a large extent also resonated with American voters. In addition, regular radio broadcasts of campaign songs enabled Roosevelt's political strategies to be widely disseminated through the media. As a result, when citizens heard the song *Happy Days are Here Again*, they remembered the democratic presidential candidate. In the end, Roosevelt realized his vision of four consecutive terms as President of the United States, and the campaign song surpassed him and became one of the songs of the entire democratic campaign [13]. After that, influential pop music became an important part of the presidential campaign in order to convey political strategy and mobilize popular support. For example, On the contrary, hip-hop's constant references to violence and male hegemony, and even its defense of the drug trade, have become the point that politicians avoid to some extent. Music, therefore, for the American political mobilization, especially in

manufacturing public opinion and attract voters is of promoting significance, however, some content out of the reality in the music will also bring interference for politicians and citizens. Thus, in the use of specific music to convey political ideas and desires of thinking is considered.

### **3.2 The embodiment of music in American celebrity politics**

One aspect of American celebrity politics is that celebrities actively participate in the politics of political parties, which is closely related to the content of campaign songs in the campaign for president. It is mentioned that the importance of building a public image for a successful politician [7], which means that politicians to a large extent need to use the social influence of celebrities and the communication ability of media to enhance their popularity and gain competitive advantage when participating in political activities. According to [5], when John f. Kennedy was President of the United States, he often invited entertainment stars such as Marilyn Monroe to parties at the White House. This is a sign of the beginning of the era of mass media-directed governance. Similarly, popular music plays an important role in campaign music in the United States, where every candidate wants to use the media to raise awareness, and combining the skills of a writer with the activities of a politician is advantageous. Specifically, campaign songs themselves are well-known, and the music establishes a connection with the candidate in a relatively simple mode, while the candidate can use the writer's popularity in the society to indirectly establish a connection with more people. As a result, American politicians' choice of certain types of music will in part target the audience they want to appeal to. For Barack Obama, the first black President in American history, the freedom and struggle themes of his favorite hip-hop music also expressed his political vision for black equality, which also gained the support of some artists. Young Jazzy, a famous black R&B singer, through the lyrics in the song *My President, Obama* and his preference Lamborghini appeared together, reflecting the significant meaning of Obama's election campaign to the black community, the lyrics repeated *we*, embodying the respect of rappers for Obama, also trying to create a relationship of equality in voters and candidates, and improving the popularity rating and support rate of Obama voters [9]. The results show that Obama's supporters are mostly young, and given the fact that hip-hop music is particularly popular among young people, it makes sense that the celebrity effect of music has played a vital role in political mobilization. Besides, it is common in the United States for musicians to participate election activities with a presidential candidate or to use their popularity to express their support for that candidate in public performances, from one of the videos about the last day of Obama president campaign in 2012 [14], the famous singer Bruce Springsteen sang to Obama's supporters in Wisconsin. In the video, he mentioned his support for Obama's political strategy of

change in 2008 and expressed his support for Obama through a live song. In addition, he flew with the President and held parties together. Therefore, in the process of mobilizing political activities, music can convey the political vision of politicians through specific songs and changing lyrics, and enhance its national influence by using popular music and the popularity and influence of writers. However, according to the reach from [7], celebrity influence seemed to have the greatest effect on people with low levels of political participation, which blurs the direct value of celebrity effect in election campaign.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This article bases on some academic and media discourses about war and the presidential election in the United States, using the Iraq war and the Vietnam war as an examples to explore the music could act as an inspiration in war and as a tool of prevent war, explore the campaign with the example of that the presidential race music helps America presidential candidates to express political strategy, to attract the support of the target population. In addition, the value of music in mobilizing political activities is that music can attract audiences to a large extent and create common social consciousness and team spirit through specific physical environment. Also, the celebrity politics in the United States conveyed by music also expresses the communication function of music in the special atmosphere of political activities in the United States could contribute to American politicians to obtain public support and mobilize political activities. What is controversial is that the research shows that most of the target groups of celebrity effect are not those who participate in politics, that is, it has little significance to the success of politicians' election. Therefore, in the further research, the specific embodiment and influence of music in American celebrity politics will become the focus.

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