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Why Politicians Embellish Their Academic Credentials

By Kevin Kiley

Christine O'Donnell, a little-known public-relations consultant, shocked the state of Delaware and the nation when she won her state's Republican primary for the U.S. Senate last month, beating a favored longtime congressman. Since the upset, several of Ms. O'Donnell's past statements, including some about her education, have come under scrutiny. When she ran for the seat in 2006, for example, she said she had a degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University. When this was revealed to be untrue, her campaign said Fairleigh Dickinson had withheld the degree because of outstanding student loans.

The university gave her a degree on August 28, two weeks before the Delaware primary. Her campaign said she had completed a final course requirement this past summer.

The Chronicle talked about politicians and their credentials with James A. Thurber, a professor of government at American University, who has studied ethics in political campaigns.

Q. Lying is nothing new in politics, but do you often see candidates embellishing their résumés?

A. It's common for people running for public office to get carried away with rhetorical flourishes about their academic backgrounds or other issues. But it's one of the first things that opposition research does—find out about their academic credentials. It's an easy thing to check. So you see these incidents popping up in the news quite often.

Q. Why are academic credentials one of the topics that candidates commonly exaggerate?

A. People respect individuals and candidates who have certain credentials, and they're seen as almost necessary for office. It's fairly rare for someone to run for Senate who does not have an undergraduate degree, and most have law degrees or master's degrees. A candidate might be embarrassed about his or her academic background. They might think that no one will check it out.

Q. What else do candidates commonly mislead about on their résumés?

A. Military service is another topic that seems to get embellished a lot. People saying they served in the military during Vietnam, which doesn't necessarily mean they were *in* Vietnam. ... People get a lot of credit for having served our country, and some people take advantage of that.

Q. Why do public figures think they can get away with misleading or false credentials?

A. Occasionally people will have something that's not true or embellished on their résumé when they first start out, when they're not the focus of attention, and they will not want to make a big fuss about it later on, so they'll go along with it. They get away with it once or twice and think they won't get caught. Sometimes people begin to believe their own lie, and that's when it really becomes a problem.

Q. Are there any similarities among the people who do this?

A. They are usually amateurs. They are new to politics and usually get into politics because of succeeding in something other than public service. People with a long background in public service tend not to make this mistake, or they've made it once before and they know not to make that mistake again.

Q. What changes could stop this from happening?

A. It's not like you need a code of conduct coming from the American Association of Political Consultants. You just need to realize that, if you lie, the truth is going to come out, and it hurts you. Sometimes, in the rhetoric of campaign speeches and rallies, you can get carried away, but you've got to remember to tell the truth. And if you exaggerate, you have to rectify it immediately.

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