



## The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

### **Interviewee: Dan Balz**

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#### ***Disclaimer:***

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Q: Dan, you've been covering campaigns for president since when?

BALZ: Nineteen eighty is really when I started, although I was the political editor at the *Post* for the '80 campaign, so I was more in the newsroom than out. But I've been doing them ever since.

Q: Eighty-four, '88?

BALZ: Eighty-four, '88, again, I was an editor that year, and then from '92 forward, purely as a reporter.

Q: I might ask you, what's the difference in perspective you have from being an editor, and being out there in the field?

BALZ: Well, there's no substitute for being out there in the field, (laughter) I think, is the simplest way to put it. I mean, when you're an editor, you know, you're obviously thinking about the coverage, kind of, in its totality, and part of it is a logistical exercise, just making sure your reporters are in the right places, that the coverage is looking at all aspects of the campaign at any given moment. You know, when you're



a reporter, you're trying to get the story, and you're trying to be in the places [00:01:00] where the story is unfolding. And, you know, you're watching it with a bird's-eye rather than kind of from a more elevated standpoint.

Q: So, when -- this might be a way of asking when did the 2004 election actually start, when did you start covering that story?

BALZ: Probably right after the 2002 midterms. You know, presidential campaigns today are, at a minimum, two-year exercises, and in some ways, they're two and a half to three-year exercises. There's so much that goes on well in advance of the time when voters actually begin to pay attention. And so, it's always been kind of our rule of thumb that we start covering the presidential campaign the minute the midterm elections are over. But even now today, I mean, in the year after President Obama won reelection in 2012, we spent not a huge amount of time, but we spent time paying attention to [00:02:00] who was getting ready to run in 2016, who were the candidates who are looking at it, kind of, what the field looks like, what the prospects are. So, in some ways, for the press, it's more of a four-year exercise, for better or worse, than a two-year exercise. But in terms of the '04 campaign, I started writing about that almost immediately after the midterms.

Q: What does it mean, actually, to cover an election campaign? What did you do during those two years before the voting took place? Where did you go? Who did you follow?

BALZ: Well, when you have an incumbent president seeking reelection, the role that I usually play is to spend more time with the party out of power, rather than the party in power. For the early stage of the campaign, the incumbent, the President, is doing his job, and mostly in the White House, and working on what you would expect a president to be working on. Meanwhile, the out party is looking forward to, [00:03:00] usually, a pretty robust nomination battle. And so, that's where I would tend to spend my time. So, in the '04 campaign, to be specific, I think I went out to Iowa, which of course has the first caucuses, probably in January of '03. I'm not 100% sure of that, but I think it was in January '03. As I recall, there was the inauguration of Tom Vilsack for a second term as governor that year, and that weekend drew some of the prospective presidential candidates to a dinner in one of the Iowa counties. And I remember going out to look at that, to see what they had to say. And I actually did a quite informal focus group that weekend that I setup myself around Cedar Rapids, just to talk to some Democratic activists, to get their early view of what the Democratic field looked like. So, from that point forward, I and others were out on the trail.



- Q: And then, [00:04:00] you stayed with the Democrats most of the time through the convention?
- BALZ: No, really, until the nomination is wrapped up.
- Q: OK.
- BALZ: Now, in that early period, in -- you know, in the winter of '03, I remember doing a piece, I think, with Mike Allen, who was then with us, who's now at *Politico*, about the Bush campaign beginning to take formation, and kind of the broader goals, the aspirations they had, you know, the fundraising targets that they were setting up. So, we did that piece, probably, in February, maybe in March of 2003. So, there were times at which, though my focus was much more heavily on the Democratic race for the nomination, I was paying attention to what the Bush campaign was doing in the embryonic stages of getting going.
- Q: Can you reflect on how covering 2004 was [00:05:00] different from covering previous elections? What had changed in the process, or what had changed in the political media?
- BALZ: Well, with every cycle, there are several changes that are almost a given, and the question, then, is how do we all adapt to it? Technology changes with every campaign, every four years, and I think that we've seen an acceleration of that post-'04, even more so than pre-'04. But the degree to which information moves rapidly was changing from, you know, '92 to '96 to 2000 to 2004. I mean, with the advent of cell phones, and BlackBerrys, and means of communication that we didn't have earlier. That's part of it. Another part of it is the fracturing of the media. You know, when I started [00:06:00] paying attention to politics, and covering politics, this was still an era when three major networks were dominant, when a handful of big newspapers, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, tended to set the agenda, and in some ways, were considered gatekeepers for information. What we saw from, I would say, from sort of the mid-'80s to the time we got to 2004, was a kind of general breaking down of that old order. So, you got to the point where *The Washington Post* did not have the influence that it once had, *The New York Times* did not have the influence to set the agenda that it once had, the rise of cable television created a different sense of audience. And I think that candidates, as a result of that, began to develop strategies. And we saw this as early as 1992 with Bill Clinton, they began to develop strategies aimed at going around traditional media to get directly [00:07:00] to the voters, to be able to deliver their message. I always had this feeling that people who ran campaigns had a better understanding of how we did our business, and therefore, could try to work



- around us, than we understood how they did their business. And so, you would often come out of a presidential campaign and say all right, here are things that we should not do again. Here are things that they sort of got the better of us. We need to be more rigorous in the way we hold campaigns accountable. So, all of those things were changing through that period.
- Q: And it's interesting, all of the major news organizations you mentioned that used to drive the coverage tried to play it straight down the middle. And am I right in thinking that by '04, you've got part -- highly partisan websites, bloggers, cable news has become more fragmented along partisan lines. Is that -- and you all are starting to be called, you know, [00:08:00] the mainstream media.
- BALZ: (laughter) Right.
- Q: As if that was some weird, you know, category.
- BALZ: (laughter) Right.
- Q: Did you feel that or sense that when you were out there?
- BALZ: Oh, sure. You know, I remember -- this was not the '04 campaign, it was a couple of cycles before that, and I remember having covered an event that happened to be on television. And I got an email from a person, a very thoughtful email. The basic message of this was, were you watching the same event I was watching? And the person made, I thought, actually some quite good points. And it was a reminder to me that the public now had access to information and to events that they had not had in the past. So, that was one difference, that people could see, and therefore, they would kind of judge our coverage based on what they saw and heard, but the other, as you suggest, is the rise of a more partisan environment, not just in political terms, but in media [00:09:00] terms. And, you know, I know that in that period, I would get emails from people who would say you're shilling for this side, or you're shilling for that side, based in part on their own world view. But what we realized in that era, in that period, and it's, I think, intensified since then, is that, you know, people seek out the information that tends to agree more with their view of the world, and screen out things that challenge that. And when you work for somebody like *The Washington Post*, you know, which still believes we should try to tell it straight, to the degree that that's possible, that we are likely to come in for criticism from one side or the other at any given moment, because people are going to see and hear things differently than we necessarily think is the way it is.
- Q: I'm going to ask in a minute about Bush 2000 and Bush 2004, but first, you've covered a lot of campaigns in which there was no incumbent running, and you've [00:10:00] covered a lot of campaigns in which there was an incumbent running for



reelection. Is there something sort of intrinsically different about those two kinds of elections?

BALZ: Well, the open races tend to be livelier and more exciting, I mean, just because you know that there is going to be a new person in office. And very often, reelection campaigns are sort of cakewalks. I mean, Reagan '84, though the Mondale Campaign, at a couple of different moments, thought they were kind of closing the gap, there was never really a lot of suspense about how that election was going to turn out. The '96 Clinton reelection campaign, with Bob Dole running on the Republican side, similarly, was not a particularly exciting or contested campaign. I mean, Bill Clinton had the advantage, almost, from start to finish. The 2000 campaign between Bush and Gore was a very exciting campaign that was, you know, it went into overtime for 37 days in Florida. You know, the '04 campaign turned out [00:11:00] to be very exciting because of the state of the country, and the state of the Bush presidency at that point, and some of the controversies, particularly over the war. And, you know, the Obama 2012 election, similarly, was very highly contested. But in general, I think, when you have an open race, you have -- for starters, you have competition for both the Republican and the Democratic nominations. And I've always thought that those periods are, in many ways, more interesting, because you have more candidates, you have more things happening at any given time, you have two distinct stories, and so journalistically, they're very exciting because you get a read of the Republican Party in transition, and a Democratic Party in transition, which you don't necessarily get in an incumbent reelection race.

Q: Talking about Bush now. I mean, granted, he's President Bush in 2004, whereas he was Governor Bush in 2000, but he's still, [00:12:00] in both elections, George W. Bush, the nominee of the Republican Party. What's it like covering -- what was it like covering Bush in 2000, as compared with 2004?

BALZ: Well, the big difference is that when somebody is the president, the access to that person is so limited. You know, in the 2000 campaign, Governor Bush was quite accessible to people. I mean, the candidate rode on the same plane with reporters, he would come back and talk to reporters, joke with reporters. Many of the reporters who were covering him had known him as governor, and had covered him, whether they were part of the Texas reporting team or the national reporters, like myself. And so, it's a looser environment, and you have more access to everybody. You know, the president rides on Air Force One, and the press, for the most part, rides in a separate airplane. There's a few members of the pool on Air Force One,



but they're in a cabin many, many, many yards away from the president, and they don't often see him. [00:13:00] I, in '04, I spent only a little bit of time traveling directly with the president, in part, because our White House team was doing it. But I remember that the access was, you know, very limited, as it was in 2012 with President Obama when he was running.

Q: And could you compare the George W. Bush you saw in 2000 with the George W. Bush you saw four years later. Was he different?

BALZ: Yes, I think, the presidency changes people. And there is a -- you know, there is a weight that goes with being president that doesn't exist if you're the governor, even of a very big state. And his first term, obviously, had been -- his whole presidency was reshaped by what happened in 9/11. And I think that that had a huge impact on him. And so, I think he was a different person at that point. I mean, you know, there are aspects of every [00:14:00] person's personality that don't change. I mean, you know, he could be a wisecracking president in the way that he could be a wisecracking governor. But I think we saw less of that in the '04 campaign. You know, he had gone through traumatic experiences with the terrorist attacks. He had gone through, or was in the middle of, a change in public opinion on the Iraq war. And I think all of that weighed down on him in a way that what he was doing in 2000, you know, was just entirely different.

Q: Two thousand, honestly, was it all about foreign policy, was it on national security? And I don't know, I guess the sense was that having Cheney on the ticket was supposed to be enough to cover that base. And in 2004, I mean, it's a wartime election.

BALZ: It's very much a wartime election. And you're right, the 2000 campaign, really, was not fought out at all on foreign policy, and the degree to which there were questions about him, [00:15:00] they were answered, A, by his name, George W. Bush, son of George H. W. Bush. I know I talked to people on the campaign trail that year, and you would ask people about George W. Bush, the governor, did he have the experience to be president, and people would routinely say, well, you know, he was raised by his father, and he spent a lot of time around the White House, he understands what this office is about. We know -- he knew that you don't understand what that office is about until you are in it, which is why the Presidents Club is such a special club. And foreign policy was not an area of his expertise, other than, you know, US-Mexico relations, which he spent some time as governor dealing with. But beyond that, he didn't. And, you know, the addition of Dick Cheney to the ticket, I think, was intended to help answer that question of would he have around



- him the right kind of people who could, you know, help make the decisions in a foreign policy [00:16:00] crisis.
- Q: While we're doing comparisons, could you compare John Kerry to other Democratic candidates you've covered?
- BALZ: Well -- boy, that's an interesting question. Kerry is a man of great self-confidence. And he believed through that campaign that he was the best person to win the nomination. And he went through a very tough period, particularly in the late summer and fall of 2003, when it looked like he, the nominal frontrunner, was letting the campaign slip away, and Howard Dean was on the rise. But there was a determination about Kerry, he was -- you know, he was not at all like Bill Clinton, he was not as natural a campaigner as Bill Clinton, he was stiffer, somewhat more reserved in that respect than Bill Clinton. He's not Barack Obama either. [00:17:00] I don't think he was ever able to kind of galvanize in the way Barack Obama did, certainly in 2007 and even in 2006 before he was a candidate, kind of galvanize people with this sense of hope and inspiration. But nonetheless, he brought to that campaign quite enormous amount of experience in the Senate with a lot of different issues, including foreign policy. I mean, you could argue that he was very well prepared on foreign policy when he ran in 2004.
- Q: How would you compare him with Bush's other adversary, Gore, in 2000?
- BALZ: Well...
- Q: You mentioned Kerry --
- BALZ: Yeah.
- Q: -- you used the word that's often used with Gore, sort of stiff.
- BALZ: Yeah, I mean, there was a similarity between Gore and Kerry in that, you know, Gore, a little bit wooden as a candidate, as was Kerry. You know, I think that both of them had similar instincts on policy, they were probably pretty close to one another. [00:18:00] Al Gore was thought to be, kind of, a new Democrat, but in many ways, he was a populist, you know, a southern populist Democrat, more so than Bill Clinton, who I think was genuinely more of a "New Democrat." And so, I think that in some ways, Governor Bush, and then President Bush, was helped by the fact that the challengers in both of those races were not seen as, kind of, natural candidates as he was. I mean, Bush had a kind of looseness about him that the other two didn't. And I think that in an era when people make some of the decisions on kind of how comfortable am I with this person, do I want this person, you know, "in my living room" for the next four years, that he was able to, you know, put himself in a better place than either Gore or Kerry was able to do.



Q: Well, let me ask you this, thinking first about Bush and then about Kerry. What is it that is widely thought to be true about George W. Bush that doesn't square with what you observed of him as a candidate, and -- observed of him personally?

BALZ: Well, you know, this notion that Bush was not particularly smart. You know, George Bush was a smart, smart man, is a smart man. And it's one of the reasons he was underestimated. And I think, you know, he knew that and he used it, he used it effectively. But he was a shrewd political thinker, and I think, you know, he knew what he didn't know, which is, I think, an important thing for anybody who's a chief executive. And so, this notion, you know, that Dick Cheney ran the Bush presidency, I never really subscribed to that, and I think the book that Peter Baker recently published, *Days of Fire*, explains [00:20:00] quite well why that kind of stereotype was simply not the case.

Q: And same question about John Kerry. What do people assume or think about Kerry that you've observed to be different in reality?

BALZ: That's a harder question to answer. I mean, I think that -- I never knew Kerry as well as I had gotten to know Bush, so it's a harder question for me to answer.

Q: Let's turn to the Democrats in '04, and you said the campaign really began after the 2002 midterm. Two thousand three was, you know, the year of John -- Howard Dean. How do you account for the Dean phenomenon, that he rose from such obscurity to frontrunner status by the end of that year?

BALZ: Well, I mean, he expressed it, I thought, you know, very succinctly. Which is, he presented himself as the representative of the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party, which [00:21:00] is to say that there was a great deal of unrest within the Democratic Party over the Iraq war, as we well know. And Howard Dean captured that in a way that no other candidate did. He hit it early, and he built a following based on that. John Kerry, of course, had supported the resolution authorizing the Iraq war. Howard Dean didn't have a vote on that, but when he got into the campaign, was quite critical of it. And there was a part of the Democratic Party that wanted to hear that message. And Dean was in a better position to deliver that message than anybody else in the race of note. And so, he was able to galvanize that, he was able to raise money off of that. He tapped into small donors and grassroots operation. They kind of were a forerunner of some of the things that Barack Obama's team did in 2008, in terms of fundraising on the internet. [00:22:00] And, you know, he had a directness as a candidate that I think was something that people were responding to within the Democratic Party.





Q: And that was a period when, going back to, you know, Jimmy Carter in 1976, it seemed like governors had the edge in presidential nominating contests, right? Carter, Reagan, Clinton, Bush. And you just mentioned something that plays into that, which is that he didn't have to vote on the Iraq -- he didn't have to vote on it when it was popular, so to speak.

BALZ: Right.

Q: He didn't have to go on record. Did his being -- and he was the only governor in the field, I guess.

BALZ: Only notable governor in the field.

Q: Did that do him any good?

BALZ: Well, yes. I mean, I think governors have an advantage for a couple of reasons. I mean, one is that people assume that if you're a governor, you have executive experience, and they know the presidency is an executive position. And so, a governor doesn't have to claim [00:23:00] to have that kind of experience, it's assumed that you have that. So, that's one thing. Even if you're from a very small state like Vermont, which is Dean's state. But the second, as you say, is if you spend a long time in the Senate, you compile a voting record that's going to get picked apart in a presidential campaign. And every person who's stayed in the Senate a long time and tried to run for the presidency has, you know, suffered from that. I mean, one of the things that Ted Kennedy told Barack Obama, when Obama was thinking about whether he should run for president in 2008, Kennedy said to him, the longer you stay in the Senate, the more difficult it will be for you to run for president and be successful. You don't want to stay here, because you're going to be surrounded by a lot of votes that you're going to have to explain away. And Howard Dean didn't have that. And, you know, Howard Dean, very bright person, [00:24:00] did some interesting things on healthcare in Vermont, which also appealed to the Democratic base. But one thing we know about the nomination process is the base of the party is preeminent, not the broad swath of the party. And Dean was tapping into that base very effectively.

Q: Given how high he rode in '03, what accounts for his dramatic fall?

BALZ: Well, there was a bit of a Potemkin village about Howard Dean. And in a sense, they created an aura -- they tried to create an aura of inevitability, which they were unable to sustain. I think that, you know, there's the famous bumper stickers, "Dated Dean, Married Kerry." Which I think, you know, sums up a lot of what happened in late '03 and early '04. I remember [00:25:00] going to Iowa in, I would say, early December of '03. And it was at a point when Dean had a full head of



steam. He was -- I can't remember whether he had just gotten or was about to get endorsements from the SEIU, and AFSCME, which was a huge moment in that campaign. I mean, these are two big powerful unions, who decided on the same day to endorse Howard Dean. And then he got Al Gore's endorsement, and he got Bill Bradley's endorsement. And poor Kerry was floundering in the polls, and particularly in New Hampshire, which neighboring state to Massachusetts, he should've been in good shape, and he was kind of bleeding in New Hampshire. And I went out to Iowa with him, and I remember being struck, we spent a couple of days on the trail. And I remember being struck at that point that this was a campaign that actually had some real potential to come back. He had given a good speech at the [00:26:00] Jefferson-Jackson Dinner in Des Moines a few weeks earlier. That's always an important event pre-caucuses for the Democrats. He had done well there, he was beginning to put together an organization, which most of us couldn't see, but you could sense, as he was on the trail, that he had honed his message, he had a sharper message. He was beginning to get his confidence back as a candidate, and I remember thinking, though I didn't write it very strongly at the time, that, you know, this race may not be over. The thing that Howard Dean suffered from was the closer people got to this question of who do we really think is the strongest candidate to go against George W. Bush, the more doubts were raised about Howard Dean. In the latter stages of '03, he did some things and said some things that raised questions about him. [00:27:00] Remember, after the capture of Saddam Hussein, he kind of dismissed it as being at all significant. Now, one could argue historically, whether that was or was not a significant moment in the war on terrorism. At the moment, people thought the world was probably better off to have Saddam Hussein, you know, in captivity, rather than still on the loose. And he kind of dismissed it. And it raised questions about what did he really think, how serious was he? And you could begin to see those doubts come to the fore and that was -- you know, that was probably mid to late December in '03. So, as you made that turn from '03 to '04, and as you were getting closer to the Iowa Caucuses, suddenly, what you realized was, this was not going to be a coronation for Howard Dean, this was going to be a competitive race. And the question was, could anybody actually, you know, make it all the way back from having fallen behind him?

Q: It sounds like in some ways, [00:28:00] Dean was like a third party candidate. Meaning, for a while, he's riding high in the polls because he's articulating a message, then when people get closer to Election Day, they think, well, can he really serve as president? Is that what you're saying?



BALZ: Yeah, I think that's very true. I mean, there is a point -- and if you look at a state like Iowa, you know, a lot of people object to Iowa and New Hampshire being the start points of the presidential campaigns, they're two small states, they're overwhelmingly white, they're not representative of the country as a whole, and for Democrats, not representative of the party as a whole. And yet, what we know is that in both of those states, the voters take pretty seriously the responsibility that goes with being first. They look at candidates, they size them up, they go to events, you know, a lot of people will see a candidate face-to-face, once, or twice, or more times. And, [00:29:00] you know, they weigh those questions. Is this person really the right person for my party to be able to win, and to be a strong president. And I think that as that comparison came to the fore, it made it harder for Dean to succeed.

Q: You know, another candidate who sort of surprised people with his strength was John Edwards, who ran a pretty close second in Iowa. How do you account for the success of the Edwards -- compared to where people thought he was going to end up, he was a very successful candidate.

BALZ: Well, John Edwards was a very effective campaigner. And he had a very strong message, this kind of -- the two Americas message. The Iowa Democratic caucus electorate is a liberal electorate. And he had refined that message, he had honed that message, and, you know, whatever else you might say about John Edwards, as a candidate [00:30:00] on the trail, he had real skills, and may have been the best pure candidate of that field. And the other thing that he did is he peaked at the right moment. I mean, you know, he came on strong in the final weeks of the campaign. The degree to which Howard Dean was kind of hemorrhaging, and Dick Gephardt, who we haven't talked about, but Dick Gephardt was initially the favorite in Iowa because, you know, he had won the caucuses in 1988, and people thought he would be a strong candidate. I think his strength was always overestimated, but nonetheless, for a long time, people thought after Kerry faded in the summer and fall that it would be a Dean-Gephardt race in Iowa. As it turned out, it was a Kerry-Edwards race, with Dean and Gephardt running, you know, in back of them. And, you know, there's some people who believe that if that campaign had gone on another week or 10 days, that John Edwards would have emerged as the winner in the Iowa Caucuses, because he was quite on fire in those [00:31:00] last days before the Caucuses. I remember, you know, I mean, the Saturday or Sunday before the Caucuses, seeing him around Des Moines, and you know, the crowds were huge, they were very, very energized around him, and you could see the possibility for



- him. But what Kerry had put together in that campaign, with the help of a fellow named Michael Whouley, who was one of the, sort of, legendary organizers for the Democrats over the years, Whouley had come in to help put that campaign back together on the ground in Iowa. And they were just meticulously building their organization and knew that the shape they were in, and kind of disguised the strength of which they thought they had. And I think that it reached the point where the Dean Campaign was turning out people that they thought would vote for Howard Dean, who by the time of the caucuses had already peeled off of Dean and were going to vote for somebody else.
- Q: You've covered, I'm sure, some of these precinct [00:32:00] caucuses in Iowa, personally.
- BALZ: Very few.
- Q: OK.
- BALZ: I mean, I'll tell you why, because every election night, I'm sitting writing the story, and so I never get out to actually go see a caucus. (laughter)
- Q: OK. Well, you mentioned Gephardt, you know, both he and Joe Lieberman were candidates who sought the president -- or been on a national campaign before. And neither one of them really got very far in '04. Any explanation for that?
- BALZ: I mentioned...
- Q: Lieberman, I know, didn't enter Iowa, but...
- BALZ: I mentioned that I had done, kind of, an informal focus group in early 2003 of activists. These were not average voters, they were activists, in the Cedar Rapids area. And my takeaway from that focus group, and I wrote it at the time, was that Gephardt had problems in Iowa when people thought [00:33:00] he was the frontrunner. And the reason for that was, when you talked to people about what they were looking for, they were looking for something fresh, and they did not think that Dick Gephardt was the fresh candidate. I mean, he had deep ties to the state, he had deep ties to constituencies in the Democratic Party, particularly organized labor, but when you talked to activists, their view was, you know, we're looking for something different. And so, I think that he always struggled against that kind of perception that if the party was going to move forward, they had to find a fresh face, they had to try something different. So, I think that was the problem. I think with Lieberman, I think Senator Lieberman's problem was that he was just ideologically out of sync with the Democratic Party. He might well have been a strong general election candidate, but he was not an effective candidate inside the Democratic



Party, particularly a party dominated by the Left. And the campaign reflected that, [00:34:00] it was a campaign that was just kind of out of sorts and out of sync.

Q: I have heard and read Kerry people saying that after they won Iowa, essentially, Kerry was unbeatable. Do you agree with that?

BALZ: I do agree with that. I mean, I think that Howard Dean had a moment to try to put it back together in New Hampshire, and they had spent an enormous amount of time building what had been a pretty good organization there. They had a person there in charge named Karen Hicks, and Karen was a first-rate organizer. And they had done just some very serious work. But once the air comes out of a presidential candidate's candidacy, it's hard to pump it back up quickly. And I think that, you know, there's not a lot of time between the Iowa Caucuses and the New Hampshire Primary, it's usually an eight-day stretch, and sometimes less. And, you know, he came back a little bit, but he could not come back all the way. And I think that once that happened, there was nowhere else for him to go. [00:35:00] And Kerry had the financial resources that nobody else, other than Dean, had. He had had establishment support. I mean, there were people who were behind him early on who kind of got nervous as he struggled through the summer and fall of 2003, but once he began to win, you know, winning begets winning. And, you know, he was able to almost run the table after Iowa and New Hampshire. I mean, John Edwards, as I recall, won South Carolina, I think General Clark won Oklahoma after that. But if you look at the great sweep of things, Kerry was on a roll after Iowa, and was pretty unstoppable.

Q: And was Edwards from that point on, do you think, running for vice president?

BALZ: Well, Edwards was a man of enormous ambition, and so I would say yes. You know, I don't know that for a fact, but you would have to believe that once it was clear to him that he was not going to be the nominee, that he very much wanted to be [00:36:00] the number two person on the ticket, yes.

Q: I was thinking of Bush versus Reagan in '80, the campaign you covered. Sort of, not going too far once he realized he was going to lose.

BALZ: Well, that 1980 campaign, though, was interesting, because it was Jim Baker who really pulled the plug on George H. W. Bush, not the candidate himself. I mean, it was Baker's decision. And I think done to preserve the possibility that he could be on the ticket, to not carry that fight any farther than they did. I mean, there's a point beyond which you don't want to go as a challenger if you want to, you know, maintain good relations with the nominee. And so, Jim Baker basically said, you know, we're out, before the candidate, probably, was ready to say I'm done.



Q: Edwards, do you have any insight into why Kerry chose him, and whether he was the best choice? [00:37:00]

BALZ: I think Kerry felt that he was a strong campaigner. I think he thought that they would complement one another. I think that he thought that the growth that John Edwards had shown as a candidate, I mean, after all, he was a still relatively new senator, that the growth he had shown on the national stage would continue. I think, after the campaign was over, I think he had some regrets about having picked Edwards. That relationship deteriorated pretty quickly after the '04 campaign. But I think at the time, he felt that he would put them in the strongest position to be able to win the general election.

Q: How did he think Edwards would complement him, complement with an E, not an I. (laughter)

BALZ: Right. (laughter) That's right! Southerner, younger, you know, sort of that [00:38:00] populist message on the economy that would complement Kerry's experience. So, I think that, you know, you can overthink this aspect of picking a vice president. You know, so much more used to go into balancing a ticket, I think that that notion, it's not that it doesn't play a role, but it plays a lesser role. I think over time, what we've seen is that the vice presidential pick is as much a governing pick as a political decision. I mean, obviously, there's politics that goes into it, but a lot of it is who do I want at my side if I become president, and whose advice do I want to be listening to for four or eight years, and that affects the decision. So, there's always some of that, and I think that the Gore decision with Joe Lieberman, probably, was, in many ways, a governing decision as much or more as been a political decision. My guess, and I've never asked Kerry or any of his people [00:39:00] about this, my guess is that the decision on John Edwards was as much political as it was governing.

Q: And you said afterward, there was -- after the campaign, there was a kind of regret? Was that because of how Edwards comported himself during the campaign?

BALZ: Well, a little bit during, and somewhat after. I think that there was a feeling on the part of some of the Kerry people that Edwards appeared to be in it more for himself than for the ticket. And, you know, long before it was clear whether Kerry might try again in '08, John Edwards was already out there, you know, running. I mean, if you remember, Joe Lieberman, he hung back in '04, kind of waiting to see if Al Gore was going to decide to run again. He was clearly interested in running, but he didn't take too many overt steps to launch his own candidacy until Al Gore said "I'm not going to run in '04." John Edwards, [00:40:00] as I recall, was in New Hampshire by



February of 2005, starting to work the circuit already. And one person told me, who knew Kerry pretty well, that Kerry had said to him afterwards that in some ways, he wished he would've picked somebody different, maybe somebody like Dick Gephardt.

Q: And would that have been a better choice? Or were there better choices available?

BALZ: Well, you know, the Gephardt choice could have been an interesting choice. You know, again, Gephardt's presidential campaign turned out not to be particularly effective, so you have to question about whether he would add much to the ticket in a general election. The argument that people made about him was that he would be able -- he would have been more helpful than Edwards in some of the Midwestern battleground states, maybe could've helped win Ohio. But, you know, that's speculation, there's no way to really prove that. [00:41:00]

Q: And you mentioned Gore not running, and I wonder, do you have any insight into why he chose not to run again in '04? He clearly thought that he'd been snookered out of victory in 2000, and didn't -- and his opinion of Bush didn't rise over the next four years.

BALZ: No, it certainly didn't. I mean, he played good soldier there for that period right after 9/11, and went to Iowa and gave a speech and said, you know, "George W. Bush is my commander-in-chief," and we all remember that. But there was no love lost between those two candidates, and I don't think that -- and particularly, I mean, he spoke out against the Iraq war before the Iraq war. And so, you know, clearly had a totally different view of what he would do as president, as opposed to Bush. I don't know, I think it may be that given what he had gone through in that campaign, given the divisiveness of the way that campaign ended, that it would have been a very, very difficult campaign win, lose, or draw [00:42:00], and I think that he just may have felt that it wasn't the right thing to do and that for him, he wanted to move on to other things.

Q: While the Democrats are settling their nomination and spending a lot of money competing against each other, the Bush campaign is raising and spending all this money. Is that a distinctive advantage for an incumbent president seeking reelection without an intra-party challenge?

BALZ: It's a huge advantage. I mean, the one thing we know about incumbent presidents who lose is that one reason they lose is they often have to face a primary challenge, even if it's not that serious a primary challenge. But, you know, Bush's father ran into the campaign against Pat Buchanan. Now, one could argue that, you know, Pat Buchanan was in no way a true challenger to President Bush, and yet, it was clear



that that was a disruptive candidacy, [00:43:00] partly because it sapped them of some resources, partly because it drew attention to things about President George H. W. Bush that the Democrats wanted to emphasize. That he was inattentive to the economy, that he was out of touch with people. The more you have to worry about that, as opposed to simply, you know, stocking your war chest, and getting all of your ads done, and doing all of your, you know, opposition research for the opposing candidate on the Democratic side. I mean, the degree to which you have a year to do all of that is enormously helpful, enormously helpful. And it clearly was for the Bush campaign.

Q: And I guess '04 was maybe the first election in which -- and this started with Dean, the major candidates didn't accept federal funding, and therefore, the restraints on federal funding, for the nominating contest, and were able -- so both Bush and Kerry spent a lot of money, [00:44:00] but Bush had a lot of money left over.

BALZ: Well, I mean, this is kind of a side story, but the shredding of the public money in presidential campaigns began with George W. Bush's decision in 2000 not to take money during the nominating process. He was the first one to do that, because, I mean, they were raising money at eye-popping rates in 1999. And so, they just decided we're not going to stay within those limits. Dean, in '04, announced that he was not going to do that because his online fundraising was so strong. And they did not want to be held down by the overall spending limits that they knew they would face if they were the nominee, that long period from when you clinch the nomination in the spring to the convention. Kerry made the same calculation, [00:45:00] that if he was going to be a viable candidate, both against Howard Dean, but also in the general election, that he would forego the fundraising. So, for the primary season, all of the limits were off for all of the major candidates. And so, the Bush campaign, which had done enormously well in 2000, set a much higher target for 2004. As I recall, and I'm sure they know they exceeded this, their early target was about \$250 million, which they started to talk about quietly in early 2003. Now, by the end, they raised more than that. But that was an important element of what was going on in that campaign. And then, of course, there was -- both Kerry and Bush stayed within the limits for the fall campaign, and we can talk about that at a later point, there's some significant effects of that as well.

Q: Well, [00:46:00] that \$250 million or whatever it ended up being that the Bush campaign is raising is for his campaign to get the Republican nomination.

BALZ: Right! (laughter)

Q: He has no opponent.





BALZ: Right. Well, it's to be spent during the nominating season.

Q: (laughter) OK, OK.

BALZ: (laughter) And if you don't have an opponent, you find other ways to spend it, and they did. But they were -- I mean, Kerry effectively wrapped up the nomination by the end of February in 2004. And, you know, within a couple of weeks, the Bush campaign was on the air with its first round of advertising, and never stopped. And started with, as all campaigns do, started with positive advertising, and pivoted fairly quickly to negative advertising aimed at attacking Kerry, before Kerry could, you know, restock his campaign, get his feet back under him from the long nomination process. So, the Bush campaign was just loaded, ready to go, at the moment [00:47:00] that Kerry had to make the pivot from being a candidate for the nomination to somebody who was now running a general election campaign. I mean, that's one other difference that we saw in this period of, you know, from '92, '96, 2000, 2004, and beyond. The general election campaign starts earlier and earlier. The general election campaign starts, now, the minute somebody has wrapped up, you know, the nomination. You know, it kind of -- you know, there was a time when it started on Labor Day, back in the old, old days. There was a time it sort of started at the convention, or just before the convention, or when somebody would -- if they would pick a vice president before the convention, it would start around then. But there always seemed like there was to be a little bit of a hiatus from the spring until the summer. No longer the case. I mean, the minute there's a nominee on one side, if there's [00:48:00] an incumbent on the other side, that incumbent is ready to go.

Q: And the convention, the Democratic Convention was first. By the way, can you explain this, why is it that the out party has its convention earlier than the in party, and therefore, has to start relying on its general election money that much sooner?

BALZ: Well, it's just historically the case that the party that holds the presidency has the last convention.

Q: OK.

BALZ: It really wasn't until '04 that this difference about the money became a factor. And part of that was that there was a significant gap between the Republican Convention and the Democratic Convention. Prior to '04, the conventions were generally held -- one was held some time in mid to late July, and the other was held some time by mid-August. So, there may have been a few weeks [00:49:00] difference, but not a huge amount. The Bush campaign, in '04, decided that they were going to hold the latest convention that we had seen in the modern era, they were going to hold it,



basically, around Labor Day of 2004. They chose New York as the site of the convention, not by accident. They chose a late convention because that would be very close to the anniversary of the attacks on 9/11, which happened, you know, in New York in part. All strategically done. The consequence of that was that the Kerry campaign finished its convention in mid-July, or, I don't know, the 20<sup>th</sup> let's say, of July. The Bush campaign didn't finish until early September. So, if you're taking federal financing for the general election, you have a bucket of, what was it in that year?

Q: Seventy-five million, I think.

BALZ: Seventy-five, I was going to say 80, \$75 million. [00:50:00] If you have to spend -- if you have eight weeks to spend that, you are at a -- or seven weeks to spend that, you're at a significant advantage over somebody who has to spread that same amount money out over 12 weeks. And that's what happened to Kerry. And they were aware of this. As I recall, they looked at whether there was a way to not formally accept the nomination at the convention, but to wait a few weeks. They decided ultimately that that was a nonstarter. But they knew they were at a disadvantage on that. And it's why we've seen since then, both conventions run back-to-back, because the out party has not wanted to be at a disadvantage. But now we're at a point, because nobody is now taking money for the general election that in a sense, it doesn't matter. And Mitt Romney ran into the opposite problem in 2012 that John Kerry had in 2008. But by that, I mean, [00:51:00] he came out of the nomination process, having spent \$92 million, he only had -- he had less than \$10 million in the bank. They were raising money for the general election, but they also could only spend primary season money between May of 2012 and late August of 2012. So, they had a long time to go where they were strapped for resources. If they had had an earlier convention, they could've just used general election money from then on. And so, I think it's one reason now that the Republicans are talking about an earlier convention for 2016, so you don't have the problem that Romney had, now that nobody's taking public financing for the general election.

Q: Well, let's pivot to the Bush side of this election. Basically, the same team in '04, all the way through from 2000, right? I mean, [00:52:00] Rove is in the White House, Ken Mehlman is now RNC chair, but Matthew -- I mean, Nicole Devenish, that whole team remains intact.

BALZ: Karen Hughes, the whole group. Yeah, it's one of the remarkable things about the Bush operation. And I think it's a hallmark of successful campaigns that you have a group of people around a candidate who have loyalty to that candidate, who have



long and deep ties to that candidate, and who are prepared to, you know, go through thick and thin. You know, we all remember when McCain won that New Hampshire Primary in 2000 convincingly over George W. Bush, there was all this talk about, will Bush shake up the staff, which is not unheard of. I mean, Ronald Reagan shook up his staff in 1980, just as he was winning the New Hampshire Primary, having lost the Iowa Caucuses. So, it's not unheard of. [00:53:00] But there was really no thought of this, as I understand it, with George W. Bush in 2000. It was all right, you know, we got our backside kicked in this, but we've got to figure out a way to come back, and I'm not going to heave people overboard. This is my team, I've got confidence in you, you know, we all let down in this, and we've got to come back. So, when you get to 2004, you've got a team that's very experienced, and they know how to work together. This is not a team that was not without rivalries and disagreements. I mean, all successful or losing campaigns have, you know, intra-staff conflict. But this was a very effective campaign. I'll just begin as a side note, when Haynes Johnson and I did our book about the 2008 campaign, and we were going around talking about the book, we would often get asked, was the Obama '08 campaign the best -- [00:54:00] you know, the best-run campaign you've ever seen? And there was a lot to say yes about. I mean, they had obviously -- you know, they had defeated the mighty Clinton machine in the 2008 nomination process, and so -- and they were groundbreakers on social media, and things like that. But I said, you know, you could make the argument that the Obama '08 campaign was the best, but I said, you could make an argument that the Bush '04 campaign was the best. Because, you know, Obama did not face, what I would say, was a serious general election challenge. He obviously faced a big primary season campaign, whereas, Bush was in a very difficult struggle, and that you could argue that they won a campaign that they had no right to win in 2004, and that it was in part because of the success of, you know, both the candidate, particularly in that final stretch, but also the team around him who put together, I thought, a very effective campaign.

Q: Well, apart from their experience, and their experience working together, what made the Bush team so good?

BALZ: Well, I mean, they had both a strategic vision, which all good campaigns have to have. They had...

Q: And that vision was...

BALZ: Well, that vision was that 2004 is not 2000; we cannot rerun the campaign that we ran in 2000. Mark McKinnon always had a funny line, which was the challenge they had in 2000 was, you know, the country was in pretty good shape, and yet they were



saying, you know, we need something new. That, you know, in essence the bumper sticker was, things are great, time for a change. Yet, in '04 it was just the opposite; you know, people are unhappy, stay the course. And they had to figure out a way to make that campaign about things that would put the president in a stronger light, and they were able to do that. I mean, they built on the idea that you may not agree with President Bush on a lot of things, particularly Iraq, [00:56:00] but you know where he stands, and he's a leader. And he is somebody who will have a vision about where he is going, and he'll be very direct about what he's going to do. So, that was, I think, part of it was to have a strategic understanding of what was possible and how you would sort of maximize whatever advantages you could find. I think the second was they understood that this was going to be a battle for every vote, and that they had to find a way to maximize the turnout. And I think that they did two things. One was they knew that, in large part, that this was going to be a campaign of who got their base out. That, you know, they had to increase the percentage of the Republicans who participated in the election vis-à-vis the Democrats. They had to bring that closer to parity than it had been in past elections, and they were successful in doing that. So, they put a lot of effort [00:57:00] into finding ways to keep the base motivated. But the second thing they did, and I think this is partly Karl Rove, and it's partly Matthew Dowd, and it's partly Ken Mehlman; their view was, one of the things we have to do is pick off parts of the Democratic constituencies. We have to do a little bit better with Hispanic voters than we did the last time. We have to do a little bit better with female voters, suburban females. We have to do a little bit better with these kinds of groups in order to get to 50.1%. And so, it wasn't an either/or; it wasn't a base versus swing voters. It wasn't, say, well, if we get the independent vote, we'll be fine. It was, the base is crucial, it's absolutely crucial. But at the same time, it's not necessarily sufficient, and we've got to find some ways to peel off part of the Democratic vote.

Q: With that first point you made about the [00:58:00] presenting President Bush as somebody who, even if you don't agree with him, you know where he stands, they really used Senator Kerry as a foil in that way, didn't they?

BALZ: Right, the I voted -- "I actually voted for it before I voted against it," line about the money for the war. You know, that was a gift that John Kerry gave to George W. Bush and his campaign. And they understood that was a gift the instant that they heard it. You know, this happened out in West Virginia, when Kerry was campaigning out there, and uttered those words. You know, the Bush campaign always wanted to run against Kerry as somebody who was a flip-flopper, somebody



- who had no core convictions. And, you know, as we talked earlier, if you're a senator, you're probably on different sides of issues over the years, and there's things [00:59:00] that are often manufactured in campaigns, as we've seen, that are not necessarily -- you know, that are often a distortion of where a person stands, but you can manufacture somebody's record into that. They felt that there was enough in the record legitimately, but this was kind of a perfect illustration of it. It seemed a kind of crass decision on Kerry's part to flip-flop on that particular vote. And so, you know, they just seized on that, and hit it very, very hard.
- Q: And then he goes windsurfing a few months later.
- BALZ: (laughter) Well, you know, Kerry's problem, to the extent it was a real problem, was that some people thought he was an elitist. And I think all candidates suffer from stereotypes and caricatures. Some are fair, and some are unfair. You know, Mitt Romney suffered from that in the 2012 campaign, but when John Kerry went windsurfing, you know, most people don't windsurf off Nantucket. [01:00:00] And so, it was something, again, that the Bush campaign seized upon to drive home a message. Now, you know, the Kerry campaign had things about George W. Bush that, you know, they could go after him on. But the Bush campaign, you know, was very driven. I mean, this wasn't the most positive of campaigns that we've ever seen, and modern campaigns aren't, by any stretch of the imagination. But part of their strategy was to make people uneasy with John Kerry, because people were already uneasy with George W. Bush.
- Q: It seemed like a big issue in the campaign, in terms of each candidate trying to frame the election differently, was, was the war in Iraq part of the war on terror, or was it a departure from the war on terror. Who won that argument?
- BALZ: Well, you know, you would have to say that ultimately George W. Bush lost the argument on Iraq. [01:01:00] And that was happening during the campaign. You could see public opinion moving against the Iraq war, starting in the spring of '04, and continuing through the election, and then after the election, continuing on. But I think where Bush was able to be successful was to, in some ways, kind of divorce issues purely about public feelings about Iraq to go to the broader question of he's kept you safe. We've not had another terrorist attack on US soil since 9/11, and he has been singularly focused on that. And, you know, that was persuasive enough to help him get through that election.
- Q: We've talked some about the conventions, but I wonder, could you compare the two conventions in terms of which was more effective in [01:02:00] advancing the campaign.



BALZ: Yeah, you know, I think we always slightly exaggerate this after the fact. So, take that as a starting point on what I say. But the Bush campaign -- the Bush convention was a more successful convention, because they knew what the message was. Again, you know, they were there at 9/11, they wanted to draw that focus, rather than purely Iraq. They used, on opening night, they used Mayor Giuliani, and I think the opening night, also, was John McCain, who had obviously been a rival of President Bush, and that relationship was uneasy, and yet both Giuliani and McCain vouched for President Bush as a leader, and as somebody who could keep the country safe. They kept the focus on that, as other people raised questions about John Kerry. [01:03:00] Kerry was trying to use Vietnam as a shield against attacks that he wouldn't keep the country safe. He was trying to use, you know, quite credible service in Vietnam as a way to say I've been there, you know, I've seen war, I know what war does. You can trust me; I'm not going to go to war irrationally. I will make decisions that are in the best interest of the country. But I don't think, in the end, they were able to successfully get that message framed as well as they wanted to, and then, of course, immediately after that came the Swift Boat attacks which really went after Kerry very, very hard. And which he did not respond quickly enough or effectively enough to kind of put that off. So, it set up the convention for President Bush to have a pretty good convention.

Q: Let's talk about the Swift Boat ads, [01:04:00] and when you first saw those, did you think they were going to be effective, or that they were just beyond the pale...

BALZ: I think I probably underestimated them at the moment. You know, in part because, you know, you're in between conventions. Again, you think this is a period when, you know, it's kind of a down moment in the campaign, people aren't paying attention, people are on vacation, it's summer, the convention is a big moment, you know, the Democrats have just had it, the Olympics are somewhere in the middle of all of that, you don't know how big a media buy this is going to be by an outside group. So, your first inclination is probably, boy, that's a tough ad, may not hold up to scrutiny, you know, it may not -- it can be rebutted. So, I'd say I think initially, my sense was this might not be that effective, but it turned out to be quite effective. And in part because the Kerry campaign was very slow off the mark [01:05:00] to deal with it. And that, to me, has always been a puzzle, because you know, in a sense, we've seen this before. I mean, the attacks on Michael Dukakis that came, you know, in 1988, that he didn't respond to in the August period, whether it was pledge of allegiance, or, you know, things like that. You know, another Massachusetts politician, it's a rerun of that, and yet, they -- I think that they felt



- that the ads were either unfair or not true, and so -- thought that the general public would come to the same conclusion. But, you know, in campaigns, you can never take that for granted, you have to be willing to respond, and they paid a price for that.
- Q: Now, the Swift Boat ads were one of many that year that were put on the air by this new thing called 527s, or at least newly-prominent thing called 527s. What's all that about, and does it have something to do with [01:06:00] what was meant to be a reform of campaign finance, the McCain-Feingold Act from 2002?
- BALZ: Yes, I mean, you know, with every action, you know, there's a reaction, or there are unintended consequences of all reforms. And one of the consequences of the McCain-Feingold Act, and the decline of so-called soft money, unlimited contributions to the parties was that there was a way for outside groups to collect this kind of money in very, very big contributions. And so, it created outside organizations with tremendous resources that the candidates didn't have any particular control over, and that could put up messages, could air television campaigns, and they're most effective at doing that, they're not particularly good at get out the vote operations. I mean, to the extent that these outside groups are influential, it's because they can put television commercials on the air, and do it effectively. [01:07:00] So, you know, that was the first that we really saw the effectiveness of what these 527s could do. Now, you know, we've iterated beyond that to the so-called Super PACs, and Super PACs that, in fact, are closely tied to a candidate, in the way that the 527s were not. They may have worked on behalf of a candidate, but they didn't -- you know, they weren't explicitly in Mitt Romney's camp the way that -- or the Priorities USA was for President Obama in 2012. So, you know, the degree to which campaign finance reform has sort of neutered the party's ability to raise and spend money, it has empowered these outside groups, and they're a force to be reckoned with. You could argue about, ultimately, their influence, particularly in 2012, whether it was significant or not, but certainly, the Swift Boat ads were one where they were effective.
- Q: So, McCain-Feingold [01:08:00] tells people who want to write big checks, you can't write big checks to parties anymore, so they start writing them to these new independent -- so-called independent -- legally independent...
- BALZ: Quasi-independent groups. (laughter) Yeah.
- Q: Do campaigns -- I mean, you described the Bush campaign, and you'd probably say the same about the Kerry campaign is, you know, wanting to craft a message, execute a strategy, and then there are these 527s, who are doing their own thing, or



are they? People always suspect that, you know, there's some collusion somehow. But my question is, were the 527s always helping the campaigns that they were trying to help?

BALZ: Well, the campaigns will always say no. The campaign's view is that even if this is a group that believes it's helping us, it's not necessarily helping us because we want to craft our message, we want to decide when to put forward what message. And the degree to which there's kind of, you know, interference [01:09:00] with that from some outside group, even if they're promoting your candidacy, the candidates will all say it's unhelpful. We'd rather have all that money and do it ourselves. And in fact, in 2008, the Obama campaign was very clear they did not want Super PACs doing their bidding. They wanted everything in-house. They wanted to keep control of all of the money. That's one of the reasons that they opted out of public financing in the general election when they had clearly indicated that if McCain stayed in, they were likely to stay in. They made a different decision. And I think part of it was they knew they could raise a lot of money, and that if they had tons of money, they could, in a sense, starve the Super PACs by getting all of the money directed at them, and they would have control over their message. Now, by 2012, what we've seen [01:10:00] is, you know, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama both raised, you know, in the neighborhood of \$1 billion, and you still had Super PACs who collectively were raising similar amounts of money. So, you know, the system is completely broken down now in terms of the money. So, that's always one of the considerations. But nonetheless, these outside groups, whether they were the 527s or the Super PACs, as they're not constituted, you know, if you have a lot of money, you know, you can get in the game, and that's what they did.

Q: The debates that took place in 2004, how do you cover a debate? How do you decide what to write about when you're writing about a debate?

BALZ: It's always one of the hardest stories you do as a journalist. And now [01:11:00] we do, you know, between, primary elections and general elections, you know, we did 20 and 20 in the 2008 campaign, the Republican and Democratic nomination process, and then the three presidential and one vice presidential debate. They're hard to write, because you want to give a fair rendering of the points made by the candidates. You owe that to people who didn't watch the debate, or even people who did watch the debate, to give them a fair recitation of, kind of, point-counterpoint, and this. But you also need to try to give some sense of how it all shook out. Did somebody have a really good night or a really bad night? We know that, because of television that what lives on after a debate is not the dialogue, it's a





sound bite, or two sound bites. You have to be mindful [01:12:00] of what those sound bites are, or are likely to be, and to give them enough prominence, but not to try to overdo it. And as I say, everybody will watch a debate and come away with a slightly different view. I don't think, and I've written scores of debate stories over many, many years, I don't think I've ever gotten up the next morning and thought, well, that was a really great story. (laughter) I mean, I always get up and think, oh, you know, or an hour after deadline, there's a quote I forgot to add, or there was this that didn't get into the story, or you know, you'll see somebody else's story, and they'll have made a point, and you think, oh, that was a smart point to make. There's so much that you have to try to put in. I mean, one of the things I always tried to do in a multi-candidate debate was to give voice to every candidate. I mean, have something in the story from each of the candidates, minor as they may be, insignificant [01:13:00] as they may be in the overall scheme of things, again, because, you know, they're going to get some votes, and they were on the stage, and you know, sometimes, they play a significant role at a moment in the debate, but there's only so much time and space to do a story like that, and the more you try to kind of keep that balance, the more some of this other stuff gets squeezed out. So, they are hard to write. I remember in the 2000 campaign, the first debate with Bush and Gore is now mostly remembered for Al Gore sighing. Right, I mean, you know, if people say, "Well, what happened in the first debate?" It was, well, Al Gore sighed. And we were in the filing center up in Boston for that debate, and we couldn't hear the sigh, we really couldn't hear any of it. So, this was something that happened, in a sense, after the fact. It became the story after the fact, in part because the Bush campaign was very effective in spinning that story afterwards. [01:14:00] You want to be where the debate is, but you're watching it on TV in a filing center that's noisy, it's not the most ideal conditions. So, there are a lot of reasons why those stories are difficult to write.

Q: And you mentioned, you know, what people remember about the first Bush-Gore debate. The Kerry people will say that, you know, the instant polls show they won every debate. But it seems like the only things people remember are, you know, global test, and what Edwards and Kerry said about Mary Cheney, all of which worked to Bush's benefit.

BALZ: Right.

Q: How does that happen? I mean, how is it that the debates end up being remembered for something different from -- some particular thing?



BALZ: Well, I think the first debate in '04, I think most people [01:15:00] came away with that with the feeling that Kerry had gotten the better of Bush. Now, you know, when you're writing the news story about that, you know, you're not supposed to say that overwhelmingly, you know? You're supposed to say, you know, they clashed over this and that, and Bush made this point, and Kerry made that. And, you know, Kerry had a strong night, and Bush had his moments, I mean, there are ways to kind of telegraph, but you don't go overboard with calling balls and strikes. But we know now in politics that so much of it is the commentary in relatively real-time. And because sound bites are important, because so much of what is talked about in the debate has been talked about a lot. You know, a lot of these issues have been adjudicated over, and over, and over. I mean, if you're doing 20 Democratic debates during the primaries, [01:16:00] you know, you can only write, as we did in '08, Democrats clash over Iraq in debate. Adam Nagourney of *The New York Times* and I joked long after the campaign was over that it seemed like every lead we wrote for weeks on those debates was, you know, some variation of that. So, what people are looking for is something that was different. And something maybe slightly controversial. And that feeds the post-debate commentary, and the post-debate commentary, as we know, feeds what the public perceptions are several days after the debate. I mean, Gerald Ford's gaffe about, you know, Poland in 1976 became significant mostly after the debate, and not just an hour after the debate, days after the debate it took for that to kind of become the narrative of what had happened in that debate. And so, now that same thing happens, but the timing is compressed, and [01:17:00] you know, we're now in the age of Twitter, which means that it happens not right after the debate, it happens during the debate. I mean, the first debate in 2012, there were 10 million tweets in that 90-minute debate by, you know, everybody. And it was clear within the first 15 or 20 minutes, that on Twitter, Barack Obama was losing that debate, and it never changed. You know, they had spin alley set up in Denver for that debate, and there was nothing that the Obama team could do in spin alley to change what had already been the verdict. In '04, you didn't have Twitter, but you did have, you know, the cable chatter machine. And it takes those moments, it takes those bites, it digests them very quickly, it spews out things, and it focuses on a couple of things, and that's the verdict.

Q: Do you think the debates [01:18:00] had any effect on the election?

BALZ: Well, I think that the first debate helped Kerry get back in the game, you know, in a significant way. And I know the Kerry people think that he was in a stressful position heading into that debate, and that debate helped create the perception, again, that



this was a very competitive race, you know, which it certainly was. And so, that first debate helped in that perception, but I don't think in the end these debates are decisive in the outcome. I don't think '04 was, I don't think '08 was, and I don't think 2012 was.

Q: The Kerry people will say that Bush showed up to debate a caricature of Kerry that they'd created in their own minds, that he was long-winded, that he couldn't make a clear point. Is there something about, [01:19:00] as was commented on in 2012, there was something about incumbent presidents, going into at least that first debate, that it sort of structurally makes them unprepared?

BALZ: Yes, I mean, the history of the first debates by incumbents in re-election campaigns is that they usually don't do particularly well. And there are a lot of reasons for that. One is, they think they know the issues. You know, I'm dealing with these issues, you know, I've been dealing with these issues for four years, you know, you don't have to tell me what to think, or what to say, I know these issues. So they're overconfident about how much preparation they need to do. Second, they're rusty. I mean, they haven't debated in four years. The challenger, particularly in these recent campaigns, has gone through a lot of debates, and they have become more skillful debaters. And there's nothing that says skill as a debater in a presidential campaign [01:20:00] bears any resemblance to what it takes to be president, but nonetheless, it's a rite of passage; you have to get through it. And if you are rusty, you're not going to do as well. There's a story told to me that in 2012, shortly before the first debate, President Bush, George W. Bush, had a conversation with Mitt Romney, and said, "You are going to do fine tomorrow night. I know from my own experience that President Obama is not going to be as prepared as he ought to be for this first debate," because Bush recognized after the fact that he wasn't as prepared as he needed to be. So, there is something about these first debates. There's one other point, which is, if you're the president, you are surrounded by people who -- they may disagree with you on some things, but they're very respectful. Mr. President, you know, if I may, you know, may I--when you're on the debate stage against your opponent in a general election, they are not going to be polite. [01:21:00] They are not going to say, Mr. President, may I politely disagree with you, I mean, they're just going to go right at you. And, you know, John Kerry is a pretty good debater. And whatever caricature that the Bush people thought about him, as the person that they kind of conjured up that they wanted to run against, wasn't the same person that they ran into on the stage. You know, he knew his brief, he was crisp in delivering it, he probably, as we've said, didn't have a lot of



respect for his opponent, and so, he wasn't cowed by the notion that President Bush knows all of this, and I'm a mere challenger; he probably thought he knew the issues better than Bush and was prepared to go, you know, hammer and tong in that debate against him.

Q: There was a big media story in the fall 2004 campaign, and that was when CBS News reported that George W. Bush had shirked his responsibilities in the Air National Guard [01:22:00] as a young man during the Vietnam War. That became a big story, and then it became a different kind of big story. Can you comment on that?

BALZ: Well, I can, yeah. I mean, my memory's a little hazy. But, you know, it was a very big story. I mean, the question about what Bush had done during Vietnam was an issue in his first campaign. You know, why didn't he go to Vietnam, had he gotten some kind of preferential treatment, you know, in the same way that the draft issue dogged Bill Clinton in 1992. Anybody who's of that age, you know, is going to face that. When you are running against somebody who had gone to Vietnam, who had been a decorated Vietnam veteran, and you had not, that issue is likely to come back. And it did, and, you know, when it first surfaced, it was a very tough [01:23:00] story. But, you know, as we know, it turned out not to be correct, it turned out to be based on bad information, for which CBS paid a real price once it became clear what had happened. And, you know, it's a lesson to everybody in journalism that, you know, you have to not just check and double check, you've got to triple check. And particularly when it is a story that has been looked at a number of times, it isn't as though this was the first time that somebody looked at Bush's record. And while people still had questions about it, many of those questions had been, you know, answered to the satisfaction of most people. They still may have disagreed with what he did during Vietnam, or the decisions he made about what he did, but this took it to another level, and as I say, CBS paid a real price for it once, you know, everything shook [01:24:00] out.

Q: You know, presidents running for reelection, even when they win by landslides, seldom have anything that we would call coattails. Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, none of them -- they all got reelected pretty handily, but their party's candidates for Congress didn't do especially well. Bush had been quoted as having told his campaign team, "I don't want a lonely victory or a lonely landslide. I don't want 55%, if we can win with 51% and bring in some Republicans into the Senate into the House," which happened, especially in the Senate election. Did you see that covering that election, that Bush was, more that most reelection-seeking presidents, intentionally doing things to help his party's down ticket candidates?



BALZ: Well, I had been told about that particular comment that he had made fairly early on [01:25:00] in the election. I can't remember when I wrote it, but probably wrote it -- well, I don't know when, that I had been told that he had said exactly that. "I don't want to get here by myself. If there are things we can do to increase my party's strength in the Congress, I want to do that." This was part of, I think, you know, the overall Rove strategy of kind of a rolling realignment in American politics. Karl Rove does not believe -- did not believe in the Big Bang Theory of realignment, that there are elections in which, boom, everything -- you know, the chess board is overthrown, and everything is new, and the balance is completely different. His view is bit by bit, a party can change the balance of power. And they saw 2004, because [01:26:00] you know, you had seen so much happening, kind of underneath, with the realignment of the South in particular, down below the level of the presidency, you know, which really took hold in 1994, Rove and Bush both understood this, because they had been through it in Texas. They had seen Texas go from a one-party dominated Democratic state to a state that, by the time he left office as president, had become a very red Republican-dominated state. They knew that that had taken place over a period of many years, and that it was a succession of victories that built upon previous victories. And so, they saw '04 as a moment in which they could begin to do that significantly at the national level. And so, that was their goal, their goal was not simply to win reelection, but to put in a foundation that, [01:27:00] over succeeding years, could create what they described as a durable Republican majority, not a realignment, and not something that would last forever, because, you know, nothing lasts forever in American politics. But that for a period of years, the Republicans in Washington, and in the states, would be the majority party.

Q: And what did they do to execute that goal? How was the campaign different because of that?

BALZ: Well, I mean, I think they paid more attention to candidate recruitment that was going on. There was more integration with the Republican National Committee. They worked hand in glove with state parties to coordinate things in a way that probably some campaigns had not done. I mean, presidential campaigns are often very selfish. It's the nature of the beast. And I think that the Bush campaign was as selfish as it needed to be to win, but it was also thinking about this other side of it that the more we can bring in like-minded people into Congress, the more we're going to [01:28:00] be able to get done in a second term, and the more we're able to get done in a second term, the better off we're going to be as our party goes into



- the midterms in 2006 and the 2008 presidential election. Now, as we know, it all came apart in 2006. So, you know, the best-laid plans in '04, you know, conditions changed, and events changed, and their position was seriously eroded. But that was their goal.
- Q: Did that have anything to do with why they took federal funding for the general election campaign, to not soak up all of the money that would therefore be free to go to down-ballot candidates?
- BALZ: Yeah, I think that that was part of it. You know, I think that they felt that, in the great scheme of things, A, it would be beneficial for others to be able to raise and spend that money, but also that it was -- if they jumped out of that system entirely, it would leave them open to criticism both for shredding the [01:29:00] public financing system, but for being all in it themselves.
- Q: On election night -- or on election day, the exit polls were sort of coming out in various phases of the day, and even as late as, I think, 5:30 or so, really seemed to be pointing to a Kerry victory.
- BALZ: They did. The early wave was not good, Ohio was way off; as I recall, there were some other states that weren't good. I remember that the Bush people looked at some of the internals of those, and thought that the demographics of the internals did not add up to something real. I mean, that there were just some oddities about what they were seeing in the internals. But nonetheless, the individual state numbers were very worrisome to them. They were not so good.
- Q: I wonder, because people rely so much on those exit polls and interpreting why the election turned out the way it did. I mean, was this kind of [01:30:00] a warning sign, that exit polls are not reliable.
- BALZ: Well, I mean, 2000 should've been a warning sign to all of us to be careful of anything until you get all of the vote. (laughter) I mean, we were all on the cusp of calling this election for George W. Bush on election night 2000, and mercifully kind of pulled back from the brink just in time. That was a warning. But, you know, we're all creatures of these numbers. And as a friend of mine once said, only half-jokingly, bad data is better than no data. And so, you know, we've all been schooled by the pollsters in-house here. Just be careful of that first wave. Just remember that that first wave is dirty. But when you see those numbers, [01:31:00] it's like this message goes through the whole political community. And everybody begins to think that that's reality. And you could see that happening on election night 2004. I think it's particularly difficult for people in television who have to talk in real-time, and they get misled by those early numbers, and they sort of begin to shape their



commentary, even before they know they're allowed to say what's really happening, they begin to interpret everything else in the context of those. And the Kerry people were clearly misled by it. I mean, people were calling Senator Kerry Mr. President in the early evening of election night 2004 until things began to change.

Q: You have an array of data and notes in front of you, and it makes me realize there are probably things that are worth talking about that I haven't thought to ask you about.

BALZ: No, I think we've -- this was just all of the [01:32:00] stories that I wrote in '03 and '04 about the campaign, which I went through before we got together, just to kind of refresh myself. And then this is just -- I keep a lot of data on election results, election to election, so I just went back to refresh myself on some of the states, and how close some of them were, and you know, 118,000 votes in Ohio, as it turned out, and this question on election night of is it still possible for John Kerry to win. And we were convinced, I remember, on the basis of some analysis that somebody in Ohio sent us by 2:00 in the morning, we were pretty convinced that there was no way that Kerry could win Ohio, but we did not call it at that point, we were mostly out of editions, and we thought, you know, given what had happened in '00, there was no particular advantage to kind of rushing the story at three in the morning. But at that point, when we looked at those margins, we thought there's no way that he could come back, [01:33:00] and that turned out to be the case.

Q: Well, margins aside, one of the things about the turnout in that election was how big it was.

BALZ: Huge, it was huge. Yeah, I mean, it went up, what 20 million votes?

Q: Well, Bush got nine million more votes in '04 than he got in 2000, and Kerry did better than Gore, I don't remember by how much, but...

BALZ: So, it wasn't 20 million, but it was at least 15 million more.

Q: At least 15.

BALZ: Right. And there was a question going into that campaign about, you know, what would turnout look like, I mean, as there is in every campaign. But that was a huge, huge jump.

Q: How do you account for that?

BALZ: Well, you know, the country was very divided, and what we've seen in modern elections is, when the country is divided and there's something really at stake, people really come out. But the other is, I think that both campaigns worked very hard at turning out vote -- put together more sophisticated get out the vote operations than we had seen in the past. So, it's a combination [01:34:00] of, you



know, getting more people registered, because if you get a person registered, they're much more likely to turn out. The controversy over Iraq, the sense of possibility, Republicans feeling they had to hold this, Democrats believing they could win it drove people to come out. So, I think there were a whole series of factors that energized the electorate. I mean, we just -- you know, as you went around in that campaign, you could just feel that there was energy on both sides. Interestingly, the two campaigns did their get out the vote operations differently. I mean, the Bush operation was mostly homegrown, and one of the things that they did, they had done after 2000, they had concluded that the Gore Campaign and the Democrats had gotten the better of them on voter turnout operations. And they did a lot of research, and they did a lot of experimentation [01:35:00] to try to improve things, and they did some pilot projects in the midterm elections. But one of the things they put a new emphasis on was doing voter contact by people who knew the voter. Instead of a kind of nameless faceless person on a phone, a neighbor. Getting a friend or a neighbor to call or knock on a door, that that was said to be more effective. And I think they showed that that was more effective. The Kerry campaign, in a sense, outsourced a lot of the get out the vote operation to this organization called Americans Coming Together, shorthand ACT, which was the labor unions, and some of the Democratic apparatus. And the Kerry campaign had some of its own get out the vote operation, but in a lot of states, they did it more through ACT than through their own operation. And, you know, I think that they all came to the conclusion that what the Bush team had done was more effective [01:36:00] in the end in getting that vote out than what the Democrats had done.

Q: Well, Dan Balz, it's been a great hour and a half, thank you so much for this.

BALZ: Thank you, it's been fun to relive the campaign.

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