



The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Dr. John Geer

Distinguished Professor and Chair of Political Science, Vanderbilt University

Interviewer: Dr. Michael Nelson

Fulmer Professor of Political Science, Rhodes College
Fellow, SMU Center for Presidential History

Disclaimer: *This transcription has been prepared according to the strictest practices of the academic and transcription communities and offers our best good-faith effort at reproducing in text our subject's spoken words. In all cases, however, the video of this interview represents the definitive version of the words spoken by interviewees.*

May 1, 2014

Q: OK. John Geer, Professor John Geer, whatever possessed you to write a book called *In Defense of Negativity*? What gave you the idea and the motivation to write a book with that theme?

GEER: Well, you know, I'd been studying campaigns for a long, long time, and I had been looking at political ads, and I've been coding them, and I had an idea about looking at how the ads would affect the public. But I realized that the methodology that I would employ wasn't going to be cutting edge, and really wasn't going to influence many people. And then some work came out by Steve Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, complaining about negative ads and saying that they demobilize the public, etc. And two things struck me about that work. One is that I didn't believe that negative ads would necessarily demobilize it. In fact, I could imagine attacking somebody might give you reason to turn out, because you're reminded when Democrats [00:01:00]are Democrats, it's partly because they don't like the Republicans. So if you tell people why the Republicans are bad to control the country, all of the sudden you might get more turnout. The other thing that's, I think, a flaw of political science as a field is that we tend to do a lot of surveys and we tend to study voters, and we think that various things are going to influence voters, but we often don't know what those things are that are doing the influencing. So when we talked about negative ads or positive ads, we really didn't have any detailed idea about what was going on. And so I thought, "You know, it's probably a good idea just to step back and take a look at actually what the ads



themselves contained.” And so rather than studying voters, I thought we should just figure out what’s going on with the ads themselves. And then I started thinking about it more and more, and I realized, “Wait a second, these positive ads, why do we like them?” You know, we find out that a candidate is going to be supportive of children, and that they favor clean water, that they want more jobs. Well, those are all good things, but there’s no candidate in the history of the republic [00:02:00] that has opposed children, opposed clean air, and opposed jobs. And so I thought, you know, the standard here that people are employing is one of some sort of coming out of, you know, political philosophy in Ancient Greek city-states and what everything should be, rather than what things were. And the basic comparison mattered. So rather than comparing negative ads to some idea about the way campaign rhetoric should unfold. Let’s compare negative to positive. And I happen to have collected a huge amount of data from ’52 to, at that point, ’92, and all those presidential campaigns. I knew almost all the ads, and I had a database that was set up for it. And so it was really the work of the *Going Negative* group by Steve Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar that got me thinking about this, because their work was important, but I thought it was a bit overstated, and it was a bit rushed because we still didn’t know enough about ads.

Q: Well, their theory [00:03:00] really confirmed and contributed to what is still in many ways the conventional wisdom, which is that when candidates go negative against each other, voters will decide, “Well, I guess neither one of them is any good.” And your term is *demobilized*, don’t vote. Where did that idea come from? And why is it so appealing to so many people who write about politics?

GEER: Yeah. It is the conventional wisdom, though I think it’s now started to fade. When that book was written in the first article that appeared in *American Political Science Review* as well, they found a five percentage point effect, and they did so both with the survey data, aggregate data, really more aggregate data and experimental data. And so it’s kind of multi-method, and seemed to have a lot of bang for the buck, and that was -- really made it quite compelling. And we also knew that turnout in general had been declining over the period, and so we had an easy explanation, that it wasn’t anything more than just these terrible, negative ads, and you could blame politicians and consultants. [00:04:00] And it just all had great appeal. But to me, again, thinking back to, you know, when I did my graduate work, after I did it at Princeton with Stan Kelley, who was very much a student of campaigns, I went and hung out basically for nine years there. I was on a study with Warren Miller, one of the authors of *The American Voter*. And I learned a lot about how partisanship worked, and partisanship was partly based on things you disliked about candidates. And so I could begin to believe that you can



see why ads might demobilize. But no one had thought about why negative ads might mobilize. And so imagine, for example -- let's take a totally different case. Let's say you and I, you know, we're friends, but we're not super close friends, but all of the sudden, I attack your mother. Well, you get engaged by that, and you're not very happy. You don't just all of the sudden shrink from it. You in fact react to it very strongly, because I'm going after somebody who you care deeply about. And so you could imagine certain kinds of attacks getting people more engaged. And I also thought [00:05:00] that the reason you're having these attacks is it's a competitive battle. It's back and forth, and competition gives people more reason to turn out. And so I began to think this is not a very well developed hypothesis by these scholars. That it was an interesting one, but not thought through the flip side of it. And so I'd written an article with Steve Finkel, who's now at the University of Pittsburgh that, I don't know, it's 15 years old or so, where we looked at the other side --

Q: The article is 15 years old.

GEER: Yes, right. Yeah. The article is 15 years old, published in 1998, where we try to develop the other side of the coin, and basically put forward a null hypothesis. That is, that it wasn't that attack ads mobilized, is that under some conditions, they mobilized, under some conditions, they demobilized. And probably, and then that didn't have much effect either way. And we had some data that, you know, backed that up, and began a whole set of articles that came out questioning the original demobilization hypothesis, to the point where I think it's very much conditional. [00:06:00] That in fact, it can decrease turnout, but it can also increase turnout. And we've also had the benefit of a lot of elections since when Steve and Shanto did their original work. But during the course, when negativity has been on the rise in presidential campaigns, starting in '88 and going forward now to 2012, that we had a big increase in turnout during this period in time. You know, more people voted in the 2008 campaign than had voted since 1960. Not sheer numbers, but I'm talking about the proportion of the eligible electorate. And so while this negativity was on the rise, which we had clear documentation of, turnout was also on the rise. Now, I'm not positing a causal relationship, but it certainly says, "Well, we got to be more careful thinking it's doing all this demobilizing."

Q: The title of your book, *In Defense of Negativity*, might sound like the title of an op-ed piece. But [00:07:00] far from being a, you know, mere polemic, there's a lot of data-based and statistics-based analysis in this book. How did you go about developing what became the themes of the book? And then demonstrating that those arguments were a better description of the truth than the conventional wisdom? And I don't want you to have to recapitulate the whole book, but can you pick maybe one or two examples?



GEER: Yeah. Well, I mean, that book came about partly because I was lucky enough to get a fellowship at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton. And so I had a whole year to think about the subject. I had been thinking about it on and off for quite a while, and I had this, you know, basic, iconoclastic kind of argument, that negative ads weren't a bad thing, that they were potentially a good thing. And it came partly from the fact that the opposition's party's responsibility in a democracy is to attack those in power. And imagine if we all of the sudden -- you know, there's been conversations about banning negative ads. [00:08:00] In fact, Mexico was thinking about getting rid of their negative ads. I went down and talked to the people, I said, "That's what you need." A democracy rests on negativity. You know, go back to the founding period, the Anti-Federalists and their scathing attacks on the Federalists. What came about? The Bill of Rights. Not a bad thing. And so I think there was just, you know, a tendency to think, "Well, negativity's got to be bad," but it's really part and parcel to democratic politics. And that certainly was the basis of the book. I happen to have just an amazing amount of data that I'd collected by luck. I'd done this detailed coding of all these ads that just fit perfectly with this particular theme, but I will tell you right now, I didn't collect it with this book in mind. I collected with a different project in mind. It just happened to fit this one, so there's --

Q: What does that mean, "coding"?

GEER: Yeah, good question. Right now, ads, because of the web, are all pretty easy to get. I have, you know, 120 or so ads from the 2012 campaign, for example, that I collected. And now it's pretty easy to get a hold of. [00:09:00] But previous ads were very hard to get a hold of. And there was a gentleman named Julian Kanter, who decided in the early '60s to collect every single political ad he could. And he did collect the early ones, and he continued to collect them. And then maybe around 1980 or so, he decided to offer his archive to a university, who would then give him an opportunity to be kind of the curator of it. And not many universities bought into it, but the University of Oklahoma did. And the Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive is still in existence. Julian actually lives in Nashville here. About 90 years old, I suppose, at this point. But I went and just looked at all those ads, because we had -- you know, people looked at speeches, people looked at a lot of things, but we didn't have any detailed read in the ads, but I knew they were there. You just had to go to Oklahoma and spend, you know, a long amount of time. And I looked at every single ad that he had that was -- you know, we're not sure of all of -- the full set of ads for any campaign. There's some controversies here and there, which ads aired, which didn't. But it's a pretty good sample. [00:10:00] And in some sense, it may be even the population. And I looked at



each ad, and did detailed coding of it. So if a campaign talked about the environment, that was coded. If it talked about attacking someone on taxes, that was coded. So I had, on average, about 15 pieces of information for every single ad, and I had about, by the time I was done, over 800 ads from the general election. And you begin to think about 800 times 15, well, that's a huge number of cases, and that became the database, so to speak, that I was able to say something systematic about these ads, as opposed to looking at one or two ads and kind of doing a seat-of-the-pants analysis, which most pundits and journalists do. I was able to look at it systematically, and I did all the kind of social science checks on reliability and validity to make sure that what I was measuring was genuine. And that's where I -- that's the database.

Q: [00:11:00] So when you look at an ad, what is it that you're coding it for? What's the information in the ad that you're collecting, and then comparing to all the other ads that you're (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

GEER: Well, this is an interesting conversation of itself. I coded the explicit material. So if I say "Mike Nelson is soft on communism," or I say that "Mike Nelson is a tax cutter that has, you know, balanced five budgets in the state of Tennessee," that balanced budget comment, that soft on communism, we count it as a separate, what I call, appeal. So the way I think conceptually about an ad is how many different appeals are made, and how many different reasons you're given. But it's only explicit reasons. And sometimes, ads are very much about implicit reasons. So you take the very famous ad from 1988, the Willie Horton ad. The Willie Horton ad was explicitly about crime. But of course, implicitly, it was about race. My coding scheme would not capture what the [00:12:00] Willie Horton ad was about. And I'm just very up front about that, because that's true, and there's no point in trying to cover it up. So I look at the explicit. But sometimes, ads do have implicit types of appeals. Now whether those appeals would actually play to the public isn't at all clear to me, because it strikes me that the implicit appeals are often aimed to try to get journalists to start to cover these kinds of things. There's a great ad by, in 1996, by Elizabeth Dole, where she's looking in the camera, talking about her husband, Senator Bob Dole, and says, you know, "My husband's a workhorse, not a showhorse." Well, that's a twofer there. I mean, that's a comment about her husband being hardworking, but also a jab subtly -- maybe not subtly, but implicitly, at least -- at Bill Clinton for being a showhorse. But my coding scheme would have counted that just for Dole. And so I tried to do some implicit stuff, but I couldn't get the reliability and validity measures, because it turns out that people interpret those through a partisan lens. So Democrats would code [00:13:00] things differently than Republicans. And I tried to do it, and it just wasn't going to work. And then I began to realize that a lot of



the interpretations of these ads are, in fact, a product of our partisanship, so it became even more important from my point of view to try to rise above that, and not be in favor of the Democrats or the Republicans, but try to tell kind of a systematic, social science story.

Q: And I think one of the points you make in the book is that [inaudible], almost always, the explicit appeals in an ad align with the visual, the implicit. So you're confessing to an error that I don't think is really a serious error in your overall data set.

GEER: No, yeah, I don't know that it's an error. I think it's just a reality. All data have its, you know, plusses and minuses, and one just needs to be honest about it. But that's right, the visuals do play consistent with the explicit appeal. So if you're talking about education, you usually have kids or a schoolroom, or something like that in the visuals. You don't have a tank. [00:14:00] And so mostly, not always, but mostly I coded just the spoken word or the written word in the ad. There are some ads -- the very famous "Daisy" ad -- which I struggled with trying to code, because there wasn't a lot of written material in the ads, or spoken material. It was very much a visual type of ad. And I tried to code that different ways, and tried to get reliability on it, and I played with the data set to see if how you code it change the results, and it didn't. So I was trying to be at least careful. But there are some ads that are very much visual only. But not very much, because people want to get a certain message out, and they're pretty explicit about it.

Q: Well, and what is it that characterizes negative ads, compared with positive ads, in terms of the number of appeals, the subjects of those appeals, the specificity of those appeals?

GEER: Yeah, the main -- broadly, [00:15:00] negative ads are more substantive than positive ads. Now what do I mean by substantive? Well, first of all, they tend to be more specific, because let's again go back to if I'm attacking Mike Nelson, I can't say that you're against children, because that's not true. But I have to say why you're against children. But when I go positive -- let's say I'm running a campaign on your behalf -- I can just say that you're for children, and leave it at that. So they tend to be more specific. They also tend to be much more documented, and this is really an important part of negative ads that I don't think people appreciate enough. And let's get outside of politics. Imagine that I go into your dean at Rhodes College, and I say, you know, "Mike just won this big award for the book on the '68 election." Well, he or she would be happy, they'd be fine with it. But let's say I instead go in there and say, "You know, the book that Mike just wrote, he made up some of the data for." Well, that's a pretty serious charge, and the dean is going to say, "Well, what's your evidence?" And if I don't have any evidence, I'm going to look like the idiot, [00:16:00] because I've just



made a very serious charge without any evidence. But on the positive side, I didn't need to have the letter documenting that you'd won this award, it was just assumed. And so there's this dynamic between you need to have some documentation to make the negative work. And if, again, 80% of negative ads have some sort of documentation, then about 20% of positive ads do. It's a huge difference, and people say, "Oh, well, it's misleading." All campaign information is misleading. It's called propaganda for a reason, and it's true on the negative side and the positive side. I'd love to use this example, but Michael Dukakis campaigned in 1988 as someone who balanced eight budgets in a row in the state of Massachusetts. Well, that's true, but it's also true that if you or I were governor, we too would have balanced eight budgets in a row because it was mandated by the constitution. He doesn't bother to say that, so that's an exaggeration. And that's one of the things that people get really upset about the [00:17:00] negative exaggerations. But what about the positive stuff? You know? I list an article on my CV that's been published in the *British Journal of Political Science*, which is a good journal. I don't mention that it had been rejected at four other journals. I leave that little tidbit out. (laughter) You know, so our CVs are examples of that. I always tell my classes. I say, "You know, do you list, you know, the times you've been caught with a false ID (inaudible) summons for it?" You don't put that on a CV, do you? But it's part of your record. Well, why? Because it's, again, you're putting the best foot forward. It's among the reasons why letters of recommendation have to be treated with some -- you know, you have to do some care, because you usually can find three people to say something nice about you. (laughter)

Q: Beyond the evidence that charges have evidence accompanying them, as compared with bragging, what about the relative focus between negative and positive [00:18:00] ads on character traits? Because at any given moment, the presidency and the president are coterminous. So it really matters a lot what kind of person, what kind of credentials, what kind of character, etc. How do negative ads show up in compared with positive ads in terms of bringing out what voters really benefit from knowing about, you know, candidates as individuals?

GEER: Yeah. Well, again, getting back to the earlier comment that negative ads need some sort of documentation, there tends to be not a lot of negative ads on attacking someone for being a bad leader, because it's kind of hard to document. Instead, you talk about them flip-flopping, because that, you can actually have evidence of, if you've changed your position on taxes or abortion or whatever. It tends to focus on inexperience. Again, something you can document. Barack Obama didn't have much experience in 2008, and becomes a basis for it. So you tend to focus on those traits that have



documentation to them. You tend not to talk too often about people not caring. Though again, in the 2012 campaign, that did come up, [00:19:00] because Romney had given some grist to the attack mill by the 47% comment, by some of the actions of Bain. And so some traits are easier to attack on, because there's just evidence for it. You just can't make it up. There tends to be -- you know, you sometimes may try to go after someone based on maybe education levels or how informed they are, how engaged they are. But again, you have to have evidence for it. Whereas the positive ads, again, they just tend to wax eloquently about what a great parent somebody is, and all of those kinds of traits. Which can matter, but it isn't -- they tend not to be attacked. I've never seen an ad attacking, at least at the presidential level, someone for not being a good parent. But it's certainly part and parcel of some of the Bush ads from '41, and some of the earlier ads as well, indicating someone's a good family person. But family's off limits, for example. You know, you just don't see -- you know, you don't attack someone's spouse, you don't attack someone's kids, [00:20:00] and --

Q: Maybe a brother.

GEER: Maybe a brother. Yes, that's true. (laughter) That has happened from time to time.

Q: John, your book is historical, and it's grounded. I mean, you talk about the founding period, you talk about Lincoln, you talk about -- in other words, [inaudible] of what appear to us to be very negative political campaigning with positive effects. But you really focus on the period from 1960 forward. And I wonder within that period, do you note any trends in terms of prevalence of negative advertising, kinds of negative advertising from 1960 on forward?

GEER: Well, on average, there's been a trend towards more and more negativity. And that certainly picked up after '88, but the '60 campaign wasn't very negative; '64 got very negative, and then it kind of was flat for a while, and then started increasing. That's certainly one, in general. There's been more attacks in American politics. And we see it today [00:21:00] in all the polarization that's unfolded between the parties and between various politicians, that attacks are part and parcel of American politics these days. Some of the other trends you see is that -- and this is tied to a variety of factors -- ads used to be longer. So there used to be minute-long ads, and now they went to 30, and now they're off in 15 seconds. The rise of the contrast ad. Really, Bill Clinton put together and started the contrast ad. There have been contrast ads in the past, but in 1996, he used a heck of a lot of contrast ads.

Q: What is a -- what is a contrast ad, as compared with a negative and positive?

GEER: Well, a negative ad is simply going to be attacking [inaudible] positive as touting somebody, and then contrast is you might start out by saying, you know, "George Bush



is a wonderful person,” and then all of the sudden go to John Kerry and start attacking John Kerry. So you have a little bit of both. And it turns out in most contrast ads, it’s about 60% negative, 40% positive. [00:22:00] So you tend to be a little bit more negative, but some people think that it lessens the blow. But it also is that a campaign is fundamentally about a contrast. You know, are you going to vote for one or the other? You may not -- you may not like George W. Bush, but you may still vote for him because you really dislike John Kerry. And so that’s become more and more common. Though again, it varies. Certain campaigns don’t have them as much, but it really started as a trend. And fortunately, my coding scheme -- a lot of early coding schemes either coded ads as positive or negative. And then the contrast ad caused them problems, because they had to put them in one of those two buckets. But because I focused on the appeal within each of the ads, I made a seamless transition to contrast ads. Again, not because I knew what I was doing. (laughter) It was more because my coding scheme was just set up -- I was thinking about the ads as offering, you know, a set of reasons to the American public about why you should vote for somebody, or vote against somebody. And so it was just a -- it was easy to pick up, and I was able to say something much more [00:23:00] concrete about contrast ads as a result of that.

Q: Why do you think -- now your focus in the book is on the ads that presidential campaigns themselves run.

GEER: That’s right.

Q: We’ll talk later about the third-party groups that have come along. But why do you think presidential candidates started turning more toward negative ads and contrast ads at some point? When was that point, and why?

GEER: Yeah. Well, I think that, you know, the negative stuff has always been around in campaigns, whether we’re talking about Thomas Jefferson, or we’re talking about Dwight Eisenhower or George W. Bush. It’s always been around. I think it’s turned around more in the ’80s and then through the ’90s for a variety of reasons. And one of them I have -- one hypothesis I have is that the journalists started to pay a lot of attention to ads following the ’88 campaign. There was a belief by David Broder, famous *Wall Street* -- not *Wall Street* -- famous *Washington Post* reporter, who [00:24:00] felt that Bush won that campaign in 1988 through negative ads, which I think is absolutely false, and I actually take that argument on in the book. But there was a belief that these ads had this power. And so we’re now going to journalist -- journalistic community is going to vet these ads. Which makes -- you know, it’s plausible. It’s First Amendment, it’s a reasonable thing to do. The difficulty is that first of all, there’s this assumption that negative ads are going to have all this false information. They equate



exaggeration with false information. It's not always true. I mean, getting back to the earlier point, campaigns are always about exaggeration. But what happened, and consultants began to pick this up especially as we turned into the next century, is that journalists gave coverage to these ads, but they tend to like negative ads. They tend to be drawn to the negative ad. They tend not to talk about the positive ad, partly because most positive ads are pretty boring. You know, finding out that somebody is a good parent and favors educated children and clean water just is pretty dull. And the negative ads had some spice to them. [00:25:00] And so then journalists began to cover these ads, and cover negative ads more, and give them the attention. But that, of course, then meant that the consultants understood that that's how you get your story out. And so they started running more negative than they might have otherwise, because that's what the journalists gave coverage to, and they were trying to shape the narrative of the campaign. And so a lot of people say, "Oh, well, negative ads work because of the evil aspects of consultants, and that the public buys them, and the public can be easily manipulated. Yeah, maybe that's part of it. But the other part of it is that journalists, by covering them, inverted the incentives of consultants to air more negative ads, because they knew that's what they'd get coverage of, because they don't -- you know, if it's an interesting positive ad, they'd give it coverage. But if it's -- the typical, kind of positive ad's pretty dull. But negative ad has some spark to it. And so that's a big change in American politics.

Q: You also write about maybe an even bigger change, and that is the growing polarization [00:26:00] between the two parties, and the extent to which that makes the Republicans and Democrats much more adversarial to each other. Can you elaborate on that?

GEER: Yeah. I mean, we have two trends that are going on here. One is the rise of negativity, and we have the growth of polarization. And there has been speculation that, by going back again to Shanto and Steve and their work and *Going Negative*, they were positing that the negative ads were driving the polarization. On the surface of it, that struck me as odd. And the reason it struck me as odd is that political ads don't have that kind of effect. And how is a political -- set of political ads going to restructure government? Restructure how the political system is working? It struck me as far too powerful an influence. Instead, it strikes me it's the other causal -- causal arrow was just reversed. That is, that the polarization of the political system gave rise to more negative ads. So Democrats and Republicans in 1976 didn't disagree on as many issues as they did in 2006. And that disagreement, [00:27:00] getting back to my earlier point, is that



negative ads have to have some basis in fact. But with those disagreements, you can have more attack politics.

Q: Let's turn to 2004, but maybe beginning with 2000, the election in which George W. Bush was first elected. He was running that year as the kind of de facto challenger, since his opponent was the incumbent vice president, Al Gore. By the way, does that structure -- campaigns and their tendency to use positive or negative strategies, whether you're playing defense, you're an incumbent, a representative of the administration, or whether you're a challenger and trying to displace an incumbent, or an incumbent administration?

GEER: Well, challenges tend to be more negative. You know, that's definitely true, because they're trying to unseat an incumbent, and by definition, they have to raise doubts. You know, if you're going to change something, you have to say why you need to change it first before you tout your own credentials. So that definitely happens, and you see that all the time. Incumbents [00:28:00] can go negative, depending on the quality of their challenger. And also, if they are running a campaign where they don't have much to run on, they may have to just go after the other side. So in 1984, Ronald Reagan ran a pretty positive campaign. Why? Well, the economy allowed him to do that. The economy was doing well, so he could run "Morning in America" kind of ads. Jimmy Carter didn't have that luxury in 1980. And so there are structural features that shape the ads, which get back to the fact that ads can't make up stuff. It's got to stick with what the evidence that's available in the campaign. So, you know, if the economy is doing well, you can be sure there's going to be some positive economy ads. If the economy's doing badly, you're going to talk about why the other person's going to stink up the economy even worse.

Q: So let's focus on 2000 for the moment. Gore versus Bush, how did they develop and implement their advertising strategies?

GEER: You know, in 2000, both campaigns were not as negative. The amount of negativity dipped a little bit in those campaigns, [00:29:00] partly because I think Gore's predisposition was he was certainly going to do what's necessary to win. But he wasn't, you know, somebody who's just going to naturally want to go after attack ads. And George Bush was a compassionate conservative. And so, I mean, these were people that pitched battle. And obviously, it was a coin flip as far as who ended up winning the election, and maybe called by the Supreme Court, however you want to say it. But it was a very close battle. But they ran a number of contrast ads, but it was an unorthodox campaign because Gore made the decision not to try to run on Clinton's coattails on the economy. And so he ran -- normally, given the state of the economy,



but he felt that he was going to get tied up into Monica Lewinsky and all that scandal, so he went away from talking about the economy. And so really, the story about the 2000 campaign isn't one of tone, of the negative or positive, but it's more Gore's choice to move away from the economy, which was going so well at that time, that was beginning to slip up near the end of the campaign.[00:30:00] But to focus on other kinds of issues. And that's really where that story goes.

Q: If Bush had run a negative campaign, do you think that would have just triggered all sorts of stories about comparing him to his father in '88? Do you think that was a reason for shying away from --

GEER: Yeah, I think that certainly was part of it. I think it was also a belief that Bush had a pretty compelling story. He had run the state of Texas with some success. You know, people underestimate President Bush in a lot of ways, in my opinion. I think academics broadly, partly because of partisanship. But, you know, this is arguably the most disciplined politician of our time. And so he could stay on message. He wasn't giving lots of opportunities for attacks. I mean, there were a couple of mistakes he made during the course of the campaign. But not a huge number. And so I think partly, his level of discipline in not giving people the sound bite that someone can run with, like a 47% or, you know, some other statements that candidates have made. [00:31:00] But I think surely that there was some sensitivity to that. But again, that gets back to the belief that George Bush, Sr. won the '88 campaign based on negative ads, and I don't see the evidence for that. Because Bush had established his lead over Dukakis before he aired any of his negative ads. Just logic tells you that that can't be the causal force.

Q: I wonder, too. In 2000, it seems like the political media was doing the attack job for Bush. You know, Gore supposedly claimed credit for inventing the internet. And then *Saturday Night Live*, you know, the spoofs of him in the debates, and so on.

GEER: Well, they both were spoofed on *Saturday Night Live*. I mean, Bush talked about "stratagery," and Gore talked about the "lockbox." Which is one of the greatest *Saturday Night Live* episodes of all time. [00:32:00] I'm sure not to the vice president and now the former president, but they were pretty good.

Q: Well, 2004, now Bush is running for reelection. And so it's a different strategic challenge for the campaign, but I think one of the things you bring out in the book is that it was a very different kind of campaign from his first election in 2000. Can you talk about that?

GEER: Well, yeah. It was fundamentally different. First of all, he's obviously the sitting president. And we had 9/11. And from the period of 1992 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, which happened in 1989, but the presidential campaign of '92 through 2000,



foreign policy didn't play a big role. Now all of the sudden, it's back, front, and center. And the response of 9/11, Bush made a very strong response, got a lot of credit, properly so. And so that issue was a huge advantage for the Republicans, because they had been able to protect us since that horrible day in September. And that changes. So you have an incumbent with a really strong issue to run on, and I think that played a big role, and was going to put the Democrats [00:33:00] in a tough position under any circumstance. The economy was doing OK, wasn't doing great, but it was doing OK. So all of the ingredients that were there for not a landslide, but, you know, the structural forces were in place for a Bush victory.

Q: And so why was the Bush campaign, by your reckoning in the book, so much more negative on balance than the Kerry campaign?

GEER: Right. Well, I think that's -- I mean, I've talked to a variety of different people, and Alex Castellanos, who was heavily involved in the Bush campaign-- is that they found in their own research that the positive ads that they might wanted to have aired, and did in some cases, for President Bush, didn't move the dials. But because Kerry was relatively undefined, they found that their negative ads had more effect. So I think they planned to run a more positive campaign, but realized that they were getting no bang for the buck out of the positive ad, and started increasingly go negative because they could define [00:34:00] Kerry in a way that put them at an advantage. And so it wasn't part of a plan, it just was what ended up working.

Q: And how did Kerry -- what was it that provided -- how is it that Kerry provided the raw material, in a sense, for a negative campaign?

GEER: Well, Kerry had done, you know, a couple things. First of all, he wanted to tout his Vietnam experience without talking about when he came back and became very antiwar, and testified in Congress. And some people might not like that. Even though I think, frankly, a lot of Americans would have understood it, because the Iraq War at that very moment was unpopular. But he chose not to do that. He also -- voting in the Senate is a problem, because you have cast so many votes in so many different complicated ways, that inevitably, it makes you look like a flip-flopper. And so they were able to paint that picture of him. And then Kerry had made the statement -- I don't have it verbatim -- but they were talking about the Iraq War, you know, and funding for it, that he was for it, and then against it, [00:35:00] and for it again.

Q: Voted for the 87 billion, before I voted against.

GEER: Right. And he said that. I mean, it wasn't that -- Bush people didn't have to make that up. And that gets back to the earlier point about negative ads. And so then they have the very famous "windsurfer" ad, which again, why would you, as a presidential



candidate, allow yourself to be put on a windsurfer? I understand you may enjoy it, but you go bowling, or, you know, you go to a baseball game and have a hotdog. You don't windsurf in front of what looks like a big yacht, reinforcing all of these images of wealth and lack of touch with the American public. And then talk about ability, because windsurfers, you have to flip back and forth all the time. (laughter) It was a wonderful ad, that I'm sure Secretary Kerry probably didn't like. But, you know, it was of his own making.

Q: Well, in '04, Bush didn't face any challenge for re-nomination. But Kerry had to fight for the nomination. And you draw attention to his earliest major opponent, Howard Dean. [00:36:00] And the nature of the Dean campaign in the summer of 2003, and what made that campaign valuable to the public discourse. Could you talk about that?

GEER: Yeah. I mean, you know, Dean captured the anger of Americans that specifically Democrats, liberals had about the Iraq War. And he captured that. And he had been against the war from the beginning, something that Kerry, you know -- Kerry signed on to the war in the famous vote in 2003. Dean was able to tie into that anger. His campaign eventually floundered, but he was able to speak to that, and it also provided, you know, a roadmap forward of how you might actually win this campaign. Not that Howard Dean was going to be able to win the general election, but that if you could tap into that anger in a way that would allow you that there was real concern -- and the Bush people were rightly worried about, you know, what might happen. Because, you know, the Iraq War had not been going the way they had anticipated.

Q: [00:37:00] In general -- and I guess in 2004 in particular-- are intra-party campaigns for the nomination as negative as general election campaigns between a Republican and a Democrat?

GEER: Usually, primary campaigns are much less negative. They don't have as many negative ads, and tend to be only positive. And I actually have a data set from 1980 to 2000 which shows that. I've never used it very much, [inaudible] negativity, there wasn't much negativity. That pattern seems to have changed, at least in the 2012 campaign. The Republican primary battle between people like Santorum and Romney, Gingrich and others, was very negative, and set all kinds of records for the amount of negative ads that were in there. Whether that's part of a new trend -- you know, the Republicans seem intent at this point in time to kind of be consuming each other, and battling each other in ways that aren't necessarily productive. So you may see it again in '16, but on average, those campaigns are much more positive. Partly because, you know, the difference between two Democrats -- there's not much difference. [00:38:00]

Q: On the issues?



- GEER: On the issues. And so there isn't as much attack, you know, basis for attacks, because you basically are coming down on the same issue. So you shouldn't expect as much.
- Q: You know, a point that came out in some earlier interviews for this project, is that especially early in the campaign, when there were a number of candidates in Iowa, for example, that for one candidate to attack another was almost like a mutual death pact, because Dean attacks Gephardt, or Gephardt attacks Dean, they both suffer, and Kerry is the beneficiary. I wonder if there's a strategic consideration there, too, at least when you've still got a multi-candidate field.
- GEER: Oh, that is definitely the case. I mean, it's among the reasons why in Europe you don't see as often as many negative campaigns, because you've got the multiple parties, and it doesn't work as well. With the one on one, it works. So yeah, absolutely, that's part of the tale. Though the nomination process, that might explain Iowa, But by the time those to get over, as you get into it, you tend to [00:39:00] get down to two candidates. But even under those conditions, you tend not to see as much negative ads, as compared to the general election, at least.
- Q: Well, 2004, could you talk about the Democrats going into their convention? Their convention was before the Republican convention. And Kerry was already clearly the nominee. So it's even more than ads, it's a national stage for a candidate to make his case to a big audience, at length, and in detail. Over four days, really. Was that an advantage? Was that an opportunity that Kerry took full advantage of?
- GEER: Well, it was an opportunity that Kerry took some advantage of, but I would certainly not say full advantage of. He left a couple things on the table that probably ended up costing him pretty heavily. You know, that convention was an effort to try to check the Republican advantage on national security, because of the 9/11 response, and Bush having all that credibility. [00:40:00] And he played his military experience, which of course, President Bush didn't have. And I can remember when John Kerry came out, he saluted and said, "Reporting for duty." And I thought, "Oh." I thought, "You're really playing this heavy." And they told the positive story. And Kerry is a war hero. He's decorated. I mean, people can complain about it one way or the other, but the record suggests that he's definitely a war hero. And at minimum, he served in Vietnam, where of course, President Bush chose not to. So you have that fact. But what they didn't do was to talk about the full story. They only accentuated the positive, and they didn't tell about some of the things that John Kerry did when he got back to the States, after he did his service. And that allowed the Republicans to do that defining. And it was during the time when Kerry didn't have a lot of money to fight back with, and I don't know how seriously they took the attacks, but third-party ads started to come up, attacking mainly,



now famously known as the Swift Boat ads came up. [00:41:00] But those Swift Boat ads were made possible, I think in part, because the Kerry people didn't take time to tell the full story about Kerry's military career in the post return of service. That's not the right term, but --

Q: And describing what that was, what Kerry did after he came back from Vietnam.

GEER: That's right. And so --

Q: Well, I'm asking you to describe.

GEER: Oh. Well, he came and he testified, and he talked about the problems in Vietnam, and what was going on there. And it sounded, by some, to be unpatriotic. But of course, what was going on in Iraq, a lot of people were complaining about the Iraq war at that very point in time, that it wasn't necessarily unpatriotic. You could argue it was very patriotic. But Kerry had to make that case, rather than letting the Republicans fill in the vacuum. And that's what happened. Especially when he had the national stage. I mean, he could have talked about that in a way that could have been quite powerful, and could have activated a lot of people. And people say, "Oh yeah, I can understand that," because the Vietnam War was always controversial. [00:42:00]

Q: So here's a case where, in terms of your theory, not taking the opportunity to present positive information about yourself. Not just positive images of yourself, but positive information, really hurt Kerry by setting him up for criticism on that score from the Bush campaign.

GEER: Yeah. I think that's right. I mean, basically, you knew the negative stuff was going to come, and you should have been inoculating yourself much more effectively against it with your side of the story. And they just didn't do that. And, you know, that whole campaign remains very controversial because of the Swift Boat ads, because it wasn't an ad sponsored by the Bush people officially. But it tapped a reasonable conversation point.

Q: Let's come back to the Swift Boat ad in a minute, but I'm also thinking about something you said earlier, and that is that the Democrats, at their convention, made a positive case for Kerry, but didn't make the negative case [00:43:00] against the Bush administration. You know, here, the Bush people who are saying all through the campaign, "If you trust President Bush in the War on Terror, the War in Iraq is part of that." And Kerry, with a message that, "No, the War in Iraq has nothing to do with the War on Terror. It's a diversion from the War on Terror. A distraction from it." Is that an argument he should have been making when they had the nation's attention?



GEER: That's a fair question. I think the answer is yes. I haven't thought enough about that to give that a full, you know, really careful, and, you know, careful and thoughtful response that it warrants.

Q: What should they have attacked the Bush Administration for?

GEER: Yeah, I think they should have gone after the Iraq War. The difficulty was that he wasn't the vehicle, because he had voted for it. And, you know, that issue came back to play in 2008. I mean, Barack Obama didn't vote for it. Of course, he wasn't in the US Senate at the time, and he had a beautiful pass on that. [00:44:00] And Senator [Hillary Rodham] Clinton voted for it. But that, you know, I think that if he had voted against it, he could have used that a lot more effectively. So they probably felt a little bit boxed in on that one. I think in the end, while I would -- you know, we can make various interpretations, is that the 2004 campaign played out basically as the structure would have predicted. You had an incumbent with reasonable popularity, the big issue in his favor, the economy, was doing OK. Most of the kind of prediction models that are based on the structural futures suggested that Bush would win, and he did. And so it was going to be a tough campaign for Kerry, no matter what. And I think he made it tougher because of what he did in the 2004 convention.

Q: Well, let's turn to the Swift Boat ad, because it's probably the most famous example, other than the Willie Horton ad, of a political ad that the candidate and his campaign didn't sponsor, but that came from some other source. So how are people supposed to -- well, talk about how that ad came to be, [00:45:00] and why it was so effective.

GEER: Yeah. Well, I think the ad itself wasn't effective, in the sense that the ad was only aired to a million Americans. The ad was effective because the news media chose to talk about it. So there were very few ad buys behind those ads. Excuse me. Aired in a handful of states, maybe a million Americans watched them. In September of 2004, 80% of Americans had said they had heard about the term "Swift Boat." Well, where were they getting that from? They were getting it from the 24/7 news coverage about the Swift Boat ad that the news media were engaged in covering it. And so I think the ad had a big effect, but it wasn't the ad itself. It was the coverage of the ad, and the way it shaped the entire narrative of the campaign to Bush's advantage. Partly because again, getting back to the convention, that the Kerry people didn't do their homework, in my opinion, in inoculating themselves against these kinds of attacks, so that, you know, why the news media chose to give this so much coverage was partly because Kerry [00:46:00] hadn't told that story. And so it became news. And then, you know, the issue was, you know, did he in fact earn these medals? And, you know, is he really the war hero? And all these things are totally reasonable issues to cover. I think the



news media went overboard, frankly, given the amount of attention it spent. I mean, that ad got more attention than any other ad in the history of presidential politics from the news media. I mean, huge amounts. I have a table somewhere, an article I've written since the book we're talking about today. And the Swift Boat ad dwarfs all ads with it. The Daisy ad, which is supposedly a hugely controversial ad, you know, ten times more coverage of Swift Boat than the Daisy ad. Maybe even more than that. The Willie Horton ad, you know, again, much, much higher coverage. So the news media really covered this ad. I think probably in retrospect, they would never give another ad that kind of coverage, because they realized it went overboard. But still, it was a legitimate issue to cover, and the Kerry people didn't handle it very effectively.

Q: Was this, to some extent, an artifact of [00:47:00] change in the news media? In other words, if this had been the '60s when you have the three major broadcast networks period in terms of television, would that kind of media structure have picked up on this ad the way the transformed media, with multiple cable news stations, including Fox News, which was looking for ways to bring down the Democrats?

GEER: Well, and they just needed something to talk about, too. I mean, that's the problem with 24/7 news. I mean, you know, Walter Cronkite era, we'll call it. You know, they had to get their, you know, story together sometime early afternoon so they could produce it for that day, so that, you know, a deadline. But now, it's constant. It's all the time. You know, think about the coverage of the Malaysian jet and all that, the amount of attention it's got. And again, partly because it's of interest to some, to many people, but it's also, you have to have fill. You have to cover something. And so I think that's what's going on. [00:48:00] And then, of course, it gets back to the early part, in the news, we like to cover the negative. And so it fills both the need to cover something, but also that it's this, you know, juicy controversy that, you know, Kerry claims one thing, and these soldiers, or former soldiers claim something else, and it becomes a great story that got replayed again, and again, and again.

Q: It's also interesting, I think, that the Kerry campaign, although it anticipated that Bush might attack them on the basis of what Kerry did after he came home from Vietnam, it never occurred to them that they would attack his war record. I mean, that was attacking him at what seemed like his greatest strength in terms of personal history.

GEER: You know, and somehow -- yes, that's absolutely true. And maybe it's something tied to the Bushes, or maybe it's something tied to the Democrats. In 1988, go back earlier, the Bush people decide to attack Dukakis on the environment, which was an issue -- how could [00:49:00] you possibly attack Dukakis on the environment, because his record is so much better than yours? But it's kind of like, "Yeah, we may suck, but you suck, too,"



is kind of the idea of it. And so you just go into the lion's den. And, you know, I don't know why the Democrats should be so surprised, you know, by that. But it's also true that even though Bush did not have a war record -- you know, Bush had been commander in chief for four years, and during the period of time of tremendous stress, where no matter what people think about President Bush, he handled that well. He made the right calls -- I'm not talking about Iraq, but, you know, the response in Afghanistan. I mean, you can imagine when he was in that schoolhouse, schoolroom in Florida when the news came across, and, you know, he realized that something was going on, and they didn't know what. And, you know, it was a tough time. And, you know, he went to Yankee Stadium. He gave the speech. You know, he had experience that I think -- you know, I would have found a way to check, and I understand why they did that. But the fact [0:50:00] that he hadn't served in the military at that point in time I think was not going to be something that was going to resonate with the public, because he had served in some pretty important ways.

Q: You know, something you just said reminded me of another, I think, really interesting finding in your book, which is that a Republican candidate talking about the environment is very unusual, because usually, the two parties like to talk about the issues that they own. So Democrats like to talk about Social Security, and Republicans like to talk about cutting taxes. But Democrats don't like to talk about taxes, and Republicans don't like to talk about Social Security. You tell the viewer here how that increases the value of negative advertising.

GEER: Yeah. There's a theory out there in political science called issue ownership. John Petrocik, I think, was the person who first sponsored it. But basically, the Democrats are strong on certain issues like, you know, Social Security, [00:51:00] and helping the poor. And the Republicans are good on issues like defense and taxes. And so it turns out that that -- you see this pattern in the data, that is Republicans talk about the issues that they own, and Democrats talk about the issues they own. But one of the interesting findings, I think, in the book, which never has gotten much attention is that the real definition of issue ownership is what issue can you attack on? That is, that if you're -- Social Security is an issue that the Democrats own. Republicans talk about Social Security in a positive way, but they never attack the Democrats on it. But the Democrats attack the Republicans on it all the time. So when the Democrats talk about Social Security, it's usually not touting their own successes, but attacking the Republicans. So the ultimate test of issue ownership is you have so much credibility on that issue that you can attack on it, and I think that goes hand in hand with the idea, but no one ever sorted that out, because they hadn't had the data. They had evidence that



you talked about the issue, but they didn't talk about whether it was a negative or a positive. And it makes perfect sense. You know, you think about politics in general, I mean, could -- you know, Menachem Begin could make a deal with Sadat. Why? Because no one was ever going to question him about being soft on military policy on protecting Israel. So he could do that. Nixon could go to China. Why? Because he was the ultimate anticommunist. McGovern could not have gone to China. (laughter) He could have gone, but he wouldn't have been able to come back. (laughter)

Q: Well, the other point you make about the positive effect that negativity has on issues that the party owns is that otherwise, they wouldn't be engaging those issues to the same degree. They wouldn't be pointing out to voters where the choice is.

GEER: No, that's right.

Q: You know, something else that's a major element of general election campaigns, and was in 2004, [00:53:00] the presidential and vice presidential debates, especially the presidential debates. Do we need commercials? Do we need ads, given that the candidates are there on live television for several hours, engaging the same questions from panelists, moderators?

GEER: Yeah. I mean, yes, you need the ads, but it's partly an arms race in the sense that imagine you and I are campaigning against each other. Maybe we have some debates or whatever. And you decide, "Well, look, I'm not going to waste any money on these ads. They don't seem to make much difference. I'm just going to stop advertising." But I continue to advertise. Then all of the sudden, I would have an effect, because I'd have a one-sided message. So one of the reasons why we have all these ads there is that they're checking each other. And so the net effect tends to be pretty small. But if you get to -- we now have the data that allows us to sort out where there's a one-sided message. Let's say you decide to air heavily around the Memphis area and I choose not to, [00:54:00] you can start to move the dials a little bit. But usually then, I'll match. And incumbents know that. And so, you know, one of the things that the Obama people were doing at the end of the campaign was making sure that they never let any ad buy by Romney go unchecked, because they could respond. And in fact, there was so much ad buying that it was hard to find places to buy ads because it was almost saturated, which wasn't true in 2004.

Q: I guess what I'm asking, though, from the standpoint of the voter, if you never watched television, never saw an ad, but only watched the debates, would you have as rich a trove of information as if you watched the ads as well, or watched only the ads instead of watching the debates.



GEER: Yeah. OK, that's an interesting question. I haven't -- I mean, I guess my first thought -- and you know more about debates than I do -- but the debates tend to be pretty positive. You know, they tussle a little bit, but they don't get into the negative stuff as much. [00:55:00] And so the piece of the puzzle that would be missing from any kind of informed decision you'd be making. You wouldn't have as many of the weaknesses. You might see someone misperform in a debate. You know, Obama didn't do well in the first debate, just as George W. Bush didn't do well in his first debate. So you might have those kinds of pieces of information. But a lot of times, that's what the news media will tell you afterwards. People who actually watch the debate don't necessarily have those kinds of responses. But the thing you'd be missing -- and I don't want to tout negative ads as such a wonderful thing -- but the problem with debates, the problem with campaign speeches, the problem with platforms, they tend not to have the negative side. And we need to know the pros and the cons before we can make an informed decision. You know, when you go to buy a car, you don't rely just on what the dealer tells you about the car. You want to find out what the other side says, and you try to get that information any way you can. In [inaudible], it's just like car dealers aren't going to tell you their weaknesses.

Q: They'll tell you the other guy's weaknesses.

GEER: That's right. And so you --

Q: The other model's weaknesses.

GEER: That's right. That's why you need the negative ads. They really do perform an [00:56:00] important function. And it isn't that they're perfect by any standard, but I think I prefer to use the term "under appreciated." (laughter)

Q: You know, you always hear -- I'm thinking now, again, about the Swift Boat ad, Willie Horton ad. There was another wonderfully appealing positive ad that some pro-Bush group put out in '04, the Ashley (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

GEER: Oh yes. Right, yeah, yeah. Right near the end of the campaign.

Q: Campaigns themselves always say, "Well, we had no idea what these groups were going to do. And honestly, they just complicate our lives. Because we don't know what they're going to do." Should we believe that? Are independent groups on your side really that kind of wildcard, that they're operating on their own?

GEER: I mean, I suspect that the campaigns would like to have all that money, and they could control it. [00:57:00] That, I'm sure, is true. Do they complicate them? Sometimes they do things that go too far. Sometimes your own party does. I mean, here in the state of Tennessee, we had the Harold Ford campaign where the Republicans aired the "Call me" ad, which, you know, Bob Corker claimed he didn't want any part of. Now, I'm not



sure that's true or not, but, you know, even sometimes members of your own party are doing it. These things are rarely truly independent, these ad groups, because they're usually made up of partisans of one side. And they may not have direct contact, but they know the kind of themes that are going to be raised. But sometimes they don't necessarily raise them as effectively as they could, and they can be counterproductive. But it's a little bit -- it doesn't have a lot of credibility to suggest these things are totally independent. But I'm sure from a legal point of view, they've taken the steps so that they wouldn't be slapped on the wrist, or become an issue in the campaign itself. But, you know, you take the Super PAC groups, I mean, they tend to be all former advisors of the candidates that they're, you know, backing one way or the other. And so there's plenty of implicit coordination.

Q: [00:58:00] I was thinking too that, you know, the Bush campaign truly never would have run the Swift Boat ad. That would have been so risky. But an outside group could do it. And if it worked, fine, from the Bush campaign's standpoint. If it didn't work, they could disown it.

GEER: That's the -- I mean, I think part of the arguments that are made in this book -- there's probably another important caveat -- and it's not a caveat -- is that the ads that I'm looking at are ads that have been sponsored by the candidates themselves. So "I'm John Geer, and I paid for this message." So I'm accountable, and I'm on the ballot. But these third-party groups, as you just suggested, aren't on the ballot, so they can say whatever they want because no one can hold them accountable. And that's a real problem. And so some of the dynamics that I see that, between the merits of positive or the merits of negative ads-- really need to be limited to the candidate-sponsored ads, that the third-party ads do have the opportunity because they're not on the ballot to push the envelope in ways that are probably illegitimate. [00:59:00] But then the news media need to be responsible enough not to give them the airtime that make them more powerful. And I think that's where the Swift Boat ad is a classic example of it being, you know, a problem. And so the -- accountability is an important thing. And these third-party groups don't have any accountability. And I'm not ever bothered by money being spent on a political campaign, but I am bothered when people can spend it and there is no accountability. And that's a real problem. And I think the current era of Super PACs is a problem. Not again because of the sheer amount of money being spent, but these people can kind of do what they want. Now, it may muck up some of the, you know, undertakings of the candidate they're supposed to be supporting, but at the end of the day, they can kind of make pretty outrageous claims under the guise of the First Amendment and get away with it.



Q: I don't know if you -- I'm sorry. I don't know if you've been able to look at this, but do the ads run by "independent groups," quote unquote, tend to be more negative [01:00:00] than the ads run by campaigns themselves?

GEER: Oh, yeah. Oh, I mean, dramatically so. I mean, 90% of the third-party ads tend to be negative. That was certainly true in '12, and certainly true in '08 -- '04. And there were some 527s in '08. There's early patterns in '14 right now that suggest that some of the Super PACs are becoming more positive. They're not positive by any standard, but they seem to be trying to do more positive message. Partly because I think they wasted a huge amount of money in '12, and they're now trying to change their campaign tactics.

Q: Wasted money in '12 how?

GEER: Because they just -- they were going after, you know, Obama, hammer and tong, and it didn't make much difference. I mean, millions upon millions of dollars were spent without changing the dynamics of that race. And I have a lot of hypotheses and not any data yet that back it up. But I have some data, but not enough that -- there was no inspi-- you know, when you do an oral history and let's say we get together in six years and we decide to talk about the [01:01:00] great ads of American politics, I don't think we'll ever talk about anything that was there in 2012. There was no interesting, memorable ads from 2012. But we'll talk about Swift Boat, we'll talk about Willie Horton, we talk about the Daisy spot. We could talk about the tank ad. I mean, there's a tremendous number of ads that we could talk about. Nothing came out of 2012. They ran an uninspired campaign, collectively, across the board, for reasons that -- I think because the speed with which they have to produce the ads, they can't think about them enough. And as a result, the quality has kind of gone down. But, you know, remember Karl Rove on election night, you know, getting the phone call? And we don't know exactly what transpired there, but it's basically someone saying, "You know, we spent all this money, and Obama's winning the -- going to be reelected." And, you know, and he thought that all these ads would make a difference. It didn't change anything. But I think that's partly because it's hard to move -- you know, people knew what they thought about Obama, and the ads aren't going to change things. So Super PAC ads, you know, will learn, and they'll be different in 2014, they'll be different in 2016. I think in the end, [01:02:00] the one lesson about ads that people need to keep in mind is that, you know, V.O. Key, which we often quote, a famous political scientist of years gone by, when he made the comment that, you know, voters aren't fools. And I think that's right. The American public are not fools. And so they just don't fall prey to claims by consultants that the consultants have to tap into something that's real and genuine, whether it's negative or positive.



- Q: Well, the ads that Super PACs or other independent groups run that are, as you say, even more negative on balance than the ones run by the candidates, are they also less evidence-based? Less -- do they contain fewer explicit appeals?
- GEER: Yeah.
- Q: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Do they have a other virtues as sources of information than the campaign sponsored ads? Or is that something you haven't had time --
- GEER: I haven't had time to look at that. The ones that I've seen, they do seem to have some sort of documentation. But that's actually a really good question. [01:03:00] That's worth somebody sorting out. There is -- there was some work done by a woman at Dartmouth, Deb Brooks, where she tried to look at some of the issues such as that, but I don't remember what she came down -- she came down on. I've often thought it would be interesting to know what effect just the tagline that was required by the McCain-Feingold bill, what that's had, an effect on advertising.
- Q: The tagline.
- GEER: Yeah. Saying, you know, even if I'm attacking Mike Nelson, I, you know, say, "I'm John Geer and I paid for this ad." What effect that's had, if any. We just don't know. We know it's shortened the ad a little bit, which in and of itself is probably a bad thing. But is it -- because, you know, they have to say that. But, you know, is it a good -- has it changed how people respond to the ads? You know, if it's a group that says, you know, "Concerned Americans for a Better Future." I don't know how the public responds to -- we just don't know. It's one of the things that -- hopefully, there's some eager young graduate student out there churning away at it.
- Q: [01:04:00] You know, back to 2004, turnout was way up in 2004, even though --
- GEER: It was negative.
- Q: It was a negative campaign. Why do you think turnout was up?
- GEER: Well, I mean, it was an engaging campaign. I think it's part of [it was?] competitive. People understood the stakes. You know, there's a -- there's actually a great -- I mean, we know that turnout was declining. But it turned out that among the reasons why turnout was declining was how we were measuring it, because we were -- we were taking voting age population, and that was our denominator. And then when people began to realize that that was inflated because of the number who weren't eligible to vote, whether they be in prison or whether they were illegally in the country, that actually some of the decline was because we just didn't have the right denominator.
- Q: (inaudible) people who couldn't vote.
- GEER: Right. And so we need to adjust the measure. But even with that taken into account, 2004 was still up. And, you know, again, it gets back to the public thinking this



mattered. And they responded accordingly. [01:05:00]The polarization in the political system may cause more people to turn out, because both sides see a huge amount of -- you know, at stake. Whereas in 200 -- let's say 199-- no, not 1996 -- 1976, Ford, Carter, you know, how big a deal was it? But imagine you have Hillary Clinton versus Rand Paul in 2016. You know, you may get more turnout because people think it matters. And so one of the -- you know, payoffs, benefits, however you want to think of a polarized system, may be more people turning out.

Q: Yeah. One last thing in your book that I wanted to ask you about, and that is you talk about -- or you cite a common lament of those who criticize negativity in advertising, which is that it reduces the level of civility in our politics.

GEER: (laughter) Yeah.

Q: And therefore, you know, the level of [01:06:00] -- the willingness of people to actually get together and make compromises and so on, or treat each other respectfully. Which, you have a very interesting take on this civility thing as it applies to, I think, government (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

GEER: Yeah. I mean, I -- you know, we -- I worry -- I mean, civility is important, and I don't want to suggest that it's not important. But I get worried when people constantly make calls for civility, because it's, like, their way of trying to control the argument, and that they don't want to have -- let's say you and I have real disagreements on issues. Well, maybe we need to have those disagreements rather than sweeping them under the rug. Unless they further that you're the incumbent, or you control the levers of power, you want things to be civil because you don't want things to change. And so that -- you know, there are things that we disagree about collectively as a country that we need to have an airing about. I mean, the issues of, let's say, abortion. I mean, it's a tough issue. [01:07:00] But, you know, you can't just say that we all agree and try to sweep those differences under the rugs. We need to have a full throttle discussion about those kinds of issues. So I worry that civility is invoked as a way to suppress debate. It needs to be based on evidence, it can't be based on, you know, just random claims. And that's what bothers me more, is that there seems to be a lack of appreciation on both sides of the spectrum for evidence. And there are certain things we can agree on. Think about the debate over global warming. And I say this not as a partisan. I mean, when 95% of scientists, you know, say that this is happening -- now, exactly how much effect we can have or whatever, I'm not a scientist, so I can't -- to ignore that and to say that it's silly, that's what drives me crazy. It isn't the nastiness of the debate, because there can be real differences. So I think civility -- it's not that I favor incivility, but when we do have serious disagreements, we have to have a full discussion of those disagreements. And



they will [01:08:00] sometimes get nasty. Democracy isn't for the fainthearted. It's for those people who are willing to have an open discussion. Because if you do away with negativity, I guarantee you, you're doing away with democracy. And so if you do away with incivility, you may be doing away with some disagreement. And we need to have those disagreements, we need to have those conversations, even if they're unpleasant. I mean, think about what's going on on campuses today about, you know, all the controversies going on with -- with rape, and with sexual assault, etc., like that. There needs to be open conversation. We can't just, you know, sweep those things under the rugs. It's not fun, it's not pleasant, but it has to happen. And so I worry that people use civility as a way to avoid the tough conversations that we need to have.

Q: John Geer, is there anything else you want to say in defense of negativity?

GEER: Nope. It's a subject that's provided me a huge amount of entertainment over the years, because it's been a fun -- it's been a fun topic. [01:09:00] And, you know, taking something that people on the surface say, "How could you possibly defend it?" And then I try to talk to them about it, and then it's not that I convince them all, but they begin to realize, "Wait a second, maybe there's, you know, something to it." And so --

Q: Well, give an example of that, because the conventional wisdom which the political reporters and others sort of [have taken for granted?], which is that negativity is bad. It's a problem. But have you been able to persuade anybody who's in a position to kind of help shape that discussion, to open their mind about this?

GEER: Yeah. I mean, I can't speak with any, you know -- any clarity or certainty about the effects that this particular book has had, but it's certainly gotten a decent amount of attention. And I think people begin to realize that maybe there is a side -- you know, there are some upsides to it. Especially when you put it against the positive ads, which we can poke fun at pretty easily. [01:10:00] And then, you know, getting to people thinking about, you know, democracy and the role of negativity. I mean, let's go to the British system, and the debates in parliament. I mean, that's demo-- you know, that's democracy at work, and they're going after each other. They're being critical of each other. And, you know, you and I, our whole careers, in some sense, have benefited from negativity. You know, your thesis advisor, the people who have been your mentors, it wasn't that they sat down and read your stuff and said boy, this is wonderful. They, you know, went after you, and they criticized you, and they made you better. You know, and we begin to realize that negativity does play this role. And people will say, well you're talking about criticism. Yes, but let's conceptually have that conversation, because yeah, there's some negativity there in criticism, but basically that's what we're talking about. Negativity is a form of criticism in a democratic system,



and we absolutely have to have it. Is it out of control in some ways? Yeah. And is it the candidates' fault? Maybe. The news media seemed to love it too. You know, we have, you know, [01:11:00] I worry about accountability of people, both on the left and the right, making completely outrageous kinds of claims. But, you know, there's -- the public will survive all of this. I mean, comparatively, what was the kind of tone of political campaigns in the early 1800s were much harsher. You know, I always cite this, you know, Thomas Jefferson was referred to as the Antichrist. It's a little harsher than a flip flopper. (laughter)

Q: Thank you, John Geer.

GEER: Thank you, Mike.

Citation: Dr. John Geer Interview, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University, The Election of 2004 Collective Memory Project, May 1, 2014, accessed at <http://cphcmp.smu.edu/2004election/interview-with-john-geer/>.

Transcription services provided for your convenience by the Audio Transcription Center, of Boston, MA. In all circumstances, audio and video remain the definitive version. Please contact CPHinfo@smu.edu with any discrepancies or comments.