



The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Mark Mellman

Current: President and CEO, The Mellman Group

In 2004: Chief Pollster and Adviser, 2004 John Kerry campaign for President

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October 15, 2013

Q: How did you connect with the Kerry campaign?

MELLMAN: Well, I had long known some of the key people running the campaign, and known Senator Kerry, obviously, for a while, and had tremendous respect for him. And some of the people that were leading that effort contacted me and asked me if I might be interested. And I had abjured presidential campaigns for some time, but eventually, it was decided it was something I wanted to do.

Q: Was this before or after he changed campaign managers?

MELLMAN: Before.

Q: Before, so who did you know there and -- and --

MELLMAN: Jim Jordan and Jim Margolis were both, I mean, I knew a lot of people there but those were the people that were -- initially spoke to me.

Q: And what was the role that you were hired to perform?

MELLMAN: Polling strategy, the usual thing that pollsters do.

Q: Yeah, and then, how did it work [00:01:00] when Mary Beth Cahill came in and Bob Shrum did more of the advertising and all that? Was it pretty smooth, as far as your role?

MELLMAN: Yeah, yeah, didn't really portend any change for me.

Q: So, you start what month?

MELLMAN: I believe it was the summer, but I can't remember, honestly.



Q: Summer of 2003?

MELLMAN: I believe so.

Q: And what does a pollster do during the first few months?

MELLMAN: Gabs.

Q: Sorry?

MELLMAN: Gabs. You know, in the early time going, there's a lot of discussion. There's not necessarily a lot of polling. But you know, pollsters pick up a lot of wisdom and -- a little wisdom and a lot of experience, let's put it that way -- and, you know, know the date and know how the country feels, know what's going on, and also have a lot of campaign experience. So, those become important assets in trying to set up [00:02:00] and move the campaign along. And obviously, that campaign had already started and it was underway before I joined it.

Q: Yeah, summer of '03, Dean is already emerging as a stronger candidate than maybe he'd appeared six months earlier?

MELLMAN: I'm just trying to remember the time. Was it summer of '03, or summer of -- could it have been '02?

Q: He raised the most money in the second quarter. His sleeve was (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MELLMAN: I mean, I was there then, but I think maybe I joined before that. I did, it would have been before that. It would have been before that because I remember that we did have a meeting in the summer, when he was raising a lot of money, and I'd been on for at least a little while already. I could look it up. I just don't recall offhand.

Q: That's all right. So, you got two elections to win, right? You've got to win a Democratic nomination and then the fall, I guess strategically, is it one baseline question, maybe, and that is, do you think in terms of [00:03:00] one consistent strategy that'll take you all the way through the convention and into November of '04? Or do you think of winning the nomination as a challenge in and of itself, and then you start thinking about after we get the nomination, what are we going --

MELLMAN: Well...

Q: Strategically, is it one election or two?

MELLMAN: It's many elections because on the one hand, you'd like to have one strategic approach that is going to take you from beginning to end. But as Napoleon said, "No plan survives contact with the enemy," and so, in real life, you end up having to have a strategy for each state along the way of that primary process. You have to decide what your message is going to be, how you're going to allocate your



resources, is your message different, the same? It's never opposite; people don't say one thing in one place and, you know, the opposite someplace else, but are there different emphases, and so on? You know, our first challenge, though, was Iowa and New Hampshire. [00:04:00] New Hampshire's obviously next door to both Massachusetts and Vermont, but you know, Dean had really captured the attention of Massachusetts and -- I'm sorry, of New Hampshire in a very dramatic way. And so... What I suggested then to the campaign was really, there are only two ways we were going to win New Hampshire. One was that John Kerry could jump into the raging Merrimack River and save a drowning child, or we could win Iowa. And we had more control over the second than the first, so, winning Iowa became the real critical variable in the process. And a lot of people were not happy with that. There were people in New Hampshire, obviously, who thought he should just keep coming more in New Hampshire, but when you say we're going to win Iowa, that that's our strategy, that has real consequences. And it means you spend less in Iowa, I mean, in New Hampshire, you spend less time there, you spend more time in Iowa, spend more resources there. [00:05:00] And so, we devoted most of our time to Iowa, but we also saw in our polling that we were doing much better among real caucus attendees than the public polls suggested. So we knew we had a much better shot in Iowa than people assumed. And obviously, we won Iowa and then it was clear, frankly, to me -- it wasn't clear to everyone else -- I mean, it was clear to me that once we won Iowa, John Kerry was going to win the nomination.

His winning Iowa was going to mean that New Hampshire would fall in line, which it did. And then, you know, might we -- might he lose some primaries along the way or some caucuses? Of course, but the momentum at that point was going to be so great that it would be essentially impossible to stop, and that's really what happened. You know, we came close in a couple of places, and we lost one or two primaries along the way. But, the momentum was just so strong at that point that it was insurmountable, and that really was the strategy, to start that ball rolling [00:06:00] with Iowa and New Hampshire, and once the ball's rolling that big, it's very hard to turn it around. I believe I'm correct in saying still, that this certainly was true at that time, that there were no one who had won both Iowa and New Hampshire and lost the in the history of the process.

Q: Well, backing up a little bit, it seemed like through '03, Kerry went through a, you know, in that sort of invisible primary stage, to use that term, Kerry starts out as frontrunner, and then seems to be in a steep decline, and then has to come back.



I mean, he was behind for a while there, in late '03. So, I guess starting out, I mean, what's it like to be the frontrunner at the earliest stage of the process? You know, a year before Iowa, so to speak.

MELLMAN: Well --

Q: And strategy, was that a place you were comfortable being?

MELLMAN: You know, first of all, you -- [00:07:00] I should say, you're taxing my memory a little bit, here. (laughter) Because this is now years ago, so I should note that, so I may make some mistakes here. But look, I think there are a couple of things that are true. First of all, John Kerry was the frontrunner in the invisible primary, but being the frontrunner in that invisible primary is pretty invisible. Which is to say, there's not much holding up that notion. Second, we had a discussion about whether or not we wanted that positioning or not, and at the end of the day, we decided we did because while it almost inevitably means you're going to fall at some point because there really is nothing holding you up, per se, it enables you to get money and endorsements and support in that early going that you wouldn't otherwise get. And if you say, "I'm not the frontrunner," or again, people that step forward and join Senator Kerry's campaign that wouldn't have done so otherwise. There's money that was raised that wouldn't have been raised otherwise. There's coverage that we got from press that we would not otherwise have gotten. So, at the end of the day, we decided [00:08:00] since we had the label available to us, we might as well embrace it, even knowing that there was not much to it. In the sense that, you know, we are not dominant in terms of raising money, we are not dominant in Iowa or, you know, in -- in -- in New Hampshire, in terms of poll numbers. Certainly not once Dean got going, and even before that in Iowa. So, there really wasn't much undergirding that notion of being the frontrunner. But it was a good title because it helped us succeed later.

Q: And, what was it about Kerry that -- I mean, he'd been in public life now for a couple decades, at least. So you had known him over time. What is it that you assumed, going into the campaign, which -- or knew that was strengths he had as a candidate and maybe weaknesses he had as a candidate that made you think he would have a good shot at getting the nomination and getting work done?

MELLMAN: Well, first of all, he's, [00:09:00] as was evidenced in his career as a senator and now as secretary of state, he's an extraordinarily thoughtful guy. He understands issues, he understands how to deal with issues creatively, and that's a tremendous talent in a candidate and in a president. Second, he had a lot of experience of the world and of the country because he'd been around for a while and because of his



activities in foreign affairs and others, he knew the territory, if you will, I think, better than anyone else, by a long shot. Third, I think it's important, it was important to me... He can be a very articulate spokesperson for himself and for the causes that he espouses. Not necessarily always in that category, but usually and often in that category. And [00:10:00] I think he demonstrated that very clearly in the debates, for example. I mean, I don't think anybody has won three debates against the sitting president, ever. John Kerry did that because of the talents that he brings to bear. But also, you know, his background as a war hero and a war protestor, at the same time, was really brilliantly suited for the times. In the sense that, you know, on the Democratic side of the aisle, the war was becoming very unpopular, and that sort of war protestor history was important. But at the same time, the fact that he was a war hero was going to -- made him more acceptable to the public at a time, you know, post-2000, post-September 11, 2001, when terrorism, national security issues, weighed [00:11:00] very, very heavily on people. Now, ultimately, I would say that's the reason that we lost, but nonetheless, he was able to compete in that arena in ways that others would not have been able to.

Q: Did he have weaknesses as a candidate? And I don't necessarily mean weaknesses that you observed because of close familiarity, but things where you thought, "There are things we're going to have to do to shore up how people perceive and understand Senator Kerry to make him the most effective candidate possible?"

MELLMAN: Well, you know, to put it this way, people never really looked at John Kerry as a regular guy. Now, that's not necessarily the most important element, but he certainly wasn't looked at that way. And we did some things to try and alter that perception a bit.

Q: Like what?

MELLMAN: Oh, yeah, there's a sort of famous hunting thing that we did in Iowa. I don't know -- famous at the time, it was sort of -- [00:12:00] got a lot of attention. But went hunting in Iowa, and you know, he's been a hunter. I mean, he's, you know, that is authentic to who he is, and who he was, and he was just doing it -- doing it in Iowa in a way that sort of showed him as sort of a more of a regular guy, kind of, than people's general impression. You know, the other thing that, you know, certainly has been noted is, as I said, while on the one hand he could be an extraordinarily effective communicator, sometimes he goes on too long and twists



himself into slightly difficult positions. I don't mean positions on the issues, but difficult rhetorical position.

And that is, you know, that was a weakness. But again, I think for the most part, more than made up for by the times where he is tremendously articulate and effective. [00:13:00]

Q: And what did you think, I mean, when you think of the other candidates for the Democratic nominations, staying with that part of the story for a while, who did you think would be the main challengers? What were their strengths and deficiencies as candidates? You know, strategically, what did you have to do to prevail over a field that included Dean, who was a phenomenon, and more experienced Democratic politicians like Lieberman Gephardt, and I'm sure I'm leaving somebody out -- Edwards, of course, is --

MELLMAN: Mm-hmm.

Q: -- this new face.

MELLMAN: Mm-hmm.

Q: How did you see Kerry getting through that field and emerging as the nominee? As opposed to -- Which would mean beating them as well as winning himself.

MELLMAN: Right. Well, you can look at that at several different levels. I think one is sort of the map. And again, as I said, the strategy was to win Iowa and use that [00:14:00] to springboard through the rest of the country, and that certainly proved to be a successful strategy. In terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the other candidates, Dick Gephardt is a dear friend and longtime client of mine, so that was a very difficult situation for me... You know, working against Dick, who I love dearly, to this day. He had a lot of strengths. He'd been through it before, which is underrated as a strength. Second, he did have that regular guy image, and third, he had an economic message that was well-suited to almost every time, but particular to those times. On the other hand, he didn't have the foreign policy piece. I mean, he does, in fact, but did not appear to have that foreign policy piece that [00:15:00] that Kerry had by virtue of his war service and war protesting.

Q: Or for any House member to have that is (inaudible)?

MELLMAN: Well, it is, it's hard for any senator, too, because unless, you know, you have that kind of military background, I mean, you can claim it as a senator, but you know, it's not -- nobody really pays much attention. And in any event -- and it was a time which, you know, usually those foreign affairs experiences aren't that important but post-2001 and September 11, it -- they were important to voters. So, that was



one of the weaknesses that Dick had, was the absence of that. And, you know, he was not new. And that is a strength in the sense that you've been around the block before, you have relationships, you've answered a million questions, you know what you're doing here. On the other hand, people were interested in something fresh, something new, something a little different. [00:16:00] As evidenced by both Dean and Kerry, and Edwards, for that matter. Lieberman, again, had, you know, had been through it before. He's also a friend, honestly, of long standing and different context. He's never been a client, but he's a friend. And an enormously talented and thoughtful guy, but as became apparent, a little too conservative for the Democratic nominating process. And a strategy that was fundamentally flawed from the get-go, in terms of emphasizing that conservatism, if you will. It just totally misread the Democratic primary electorate, and he did have to. I mean, he has lots of liberal credentials, progressive credentials as well, that he could have used and he didn't. He embraced the sort of moderate positioning, which, in the Democratic primary at that point, [00:17:00] was just totally the wrong place to be positioned. Edwards was obviously a great talent. We know now he has a lot of significant weaknesses, that were not necessarily evident at that point, but he's a very talented speaker. Was new, on the one hand, but really didn't have the level of experience, needed. Didn't have the foreign policy piece, but you know, clearly was exciting to a lot of people. And ultimately, that's one of the reasons he ended up on the ticket. I would say it was exactly that.

MELLMAN: And Dean, obviously, emerged as the major competitor for the long summer, seemingly the major competitor, and Dean had [00:18:00] an important message. On the one hand, he was very lucky. On the other, in terms of starting this internet cascade, I mean, ultimately, I mean, I know we raised more -- Senator Kerry raised more money on the internet than Howard Dean did, and so, I'm not sure that, you know, he is the internet god and Kerry wasn't. But in any event, he certainly developed that image which was, positive for him. There was not a lot underneath it for him. And so, once Senator Kerry was able to really show who he was, that support for Dean, which was, you know, sort of paper thin, at least in Iowa and New Hampshire, well, certainly in Iowa -- sort of melted away. You know, in other places, he was incredibly strong, and I remember going to the California [00:19:00] convention, which, if you'd done a poll at the California State Convention, I think Dean would have probably gotten somewhere around 98-99% of the vote at the state party convention. And telling people, you know,



California, pretty liberal state, pretty in favor of gun control, Howard Dean, NRA, against gun control, people say that doesn't really matter. When do you hear California Democrats say that? And that speaks a real strong sort of attachment to him. But by the time we got to California, all that had dissipated. But, there were places where he did really strike a very deep chord. But in Iowa, he didn't, and that was part of the problem. He was running a 50-state campaign at a time when you needed to win Iowa and New Hampshire to stay in the game. And I think that was a strategic mistake that they made. He traveled all over the country, he, you know, spread himself [00:20:00] around the country to, again, trying to be the national candidate, even though it was not a national election at that point.

Q: The decision to, well, thinking about -- I'm not sure what the sequence is, but at some point late in '03, Kerry has to decide to -- whether he's going to raise money by mortgaging his home, right? Which ended up being a \$6.4 million contribution to his own campaign. Was that tied to or separate from the decision to go heavy in Iowa? Do you remember?

MELLMAN: Yeah... I -- I don't remember exactly, but my recollection, it was loosely tied. That is, it was contemporaneous, I think, and in order to go heavy in Iowa, we need those resource, those (inaudible) resources. Where they came from, I mean, I'm on the [00:21:00] spending side, not on the raising side. So, where they came from was less important to me than that we had them to spend, in those contexts.

Q: And why would -- because it makes so much sense, when you described it earlier, Iowa, and if you went Iowa, a guy from Massachusetts is going to win New Hampshire, and then, how could -- how could that person lose? So, what was the -- what was sort of the -- just the process through which you made a decision, we are going to go to Iowa, when in hindsight, it seems like pawn to king four, like, you know, the move on the board?

MELLMAN: Right. Well, it -- everything seems --

Q: Right.

MELLMAN: -- inevitable in hindsight, or most things seem inevitable in hindsight, and they're not necessarily in foresight. First of all, there was the campaign really began as a more New Hampshire-centered campaign. Everyone assumed that was Kerry's base because it was [00:22:00] right next door. A lot of the leadership of the campaign, Jeanne Shaheen, others, were from New Hampshire. And the assumption was that's where we really got started, that you know, Dick Gephardt, you know, and others were going to really be able to make tremendous inroads in



Iowa and New Hampshire was the place that was going to be the John Kerry place. Two things changed. One is Howard Dean, and Howard Dean emerged as a rock solid choice in New Hampshire. Yeah, in New Hampshire. And it became apparent from our polling that we really did have an opportunity in Iowa. And so, it was opportunistic, in that sense. We -- We had the opportunity in Iowa, and as I said, I mean, my stake in the campaign was only two ways to win New Hampshire: one is to save a drowning child in the Merrimack River, and the other was to win Iowa. And we could win Iowa, [00:23:00] and so, given that, it made sense. But there was a lot of people who argued the point, at that stage, for various reasons. I mean, you know, it was some personal loyalties and some believed strategically that still, you know, he had that potential in New Hampshire and that he was never really going to have it in Iowa, and so on and so forth. But at the end of the day, the data told the tale.

Q: And if you could talk some about what you were doing? Because I think people hear "pollster," so he's taking polls to see who's ahead. But I know that the kind of research you're doing is much more nuanced than that. What were you doing as a pollster? What kinds of things were you polling? Were there techniques that you found to be more valuable than others? Talk shop here for a little while.

MELLMAN: Sure. Well, the primary campaign in particular or in the general? [00:24:00]

Q: Yeah.

MELLMAN: In the primary, first of all, there's a lot less polling than one would like -- at least, than a pollster would like. Again, I mean, I think there are a couple of things that we did with the polling. One is because of some innovative ways we developed of doing the sampling, we knew what was going on in Iowa in a way that other people didn't. We knew we had an opportunity in Iowa when other people thought we didn't. So, it's not -- it's a question there of sort of who's ahead and who's behind, but not quite so simply. It's a question of what's our opportunity there? Second, it's message, what are we saying to people, and third, who -- how are we saying it? Sorry, who are we saying it to -- targeting -- and then, how are we saying it, what's the way in which we're going to communicate that message? And you know, ultimately, we got to the point in Iowa, and then we developed ads and tested those ads. I mean, I worked with Jim Margolis [00:25:00] developing the ad, an ad that we tested that really proved to be outstanding, but we did it from a sort of scientific point of view. We started from the presumption that we had to change the dynamic, and so, even in Iowa, in order to win. And that simply, you know, a list of issues or whatever was not going to be sufficient. My



feeling was we had to go deep into people's psyche to be able to sort of elicit the kind of change in their thinking that we wanted to elicit. And if you study psychology and so on, you know, there are the archetypes, and there's a hero archetype. The sort of story of the hero archetype is the person who is challenged, a regular person who is challenged, meets and overcomes the challenge, and is transformed by that challenge. So, Jim and I, in talking about this, said, "We have to tell that [00:26:00] story and tell it in that way, so that it resonates at that very deep level." And so, Jim, you know, found the footage of his fellow swift boat crew saying that, you know, "The decisions he made saved our lives," you know, we had that start in Vietnam, "and the decisions he made saved our lives," and so you have that sort of tension, the drama to the story of the challenge. And then he talks about how, having gone through that experience, you realize that every day is extra and you realize what you have to do and why you have to do it, and so on. So, you had that sense of transformation that's part of that story. So, we really took the sort of deep psychological hero archetype and put it on the screen in that advertisement. It was an incredibly powerful ad. It was, I think, the single most powerful ad that was done in the campaign, and it had the desired effect.

Q: And you also had [00:27:00] swift boat veteran crew showing up, right?

MELLMAN: Yes.

Q: And so, on (inaudible) TV, what people were seeing on the news is reinforcing that.

MELLMAN: Exactly. Well, we had the ad, right, and to amplify the ad, we had the people, exactly. Who were really, you know, wonderful people who were totally dedicated to John Kerry and, you know, were giving up -- literally giving up their jobs to come and campaign for John Kerry because they believed in him so much.

Q: And then, when you won Iowa, did you think, "Uh-oh, John Edwards is turning out to be more formidable than we'd expected," and you know, past New Hampshire now, there's the Southern primaries? And did you have to recalculate your strategy because Edwards finished such a strong second and Dean really, even before the scream, you know, he was on a downward trajectory?

MELLMAN: Yeah, he was, and as I say, [00:28:00] it was clear to me, the moment we won Iowa, that John Kerry was going to win the nomination. As I said, were there going to be some bumps in the road? Yes, there always are, but we were going to win the nomination. Certainly the first piece was dispatching Dean in New Hampshire, which Kerry did very effectively and won New Hampshire, but as I



said, that was sort of an inevitability. You know, then you went to the South, and there clearly were places -- you know, South Carolina -- where somebody like Edwards had an advantage. And that's just a fact of life. To me, it was not going to be dispositive, but it caused a lot of worry in the campaign at first, that we could lose a primary like that, and that the general election planning was called off so that we could be totally dedicated [00:29:00] to winning the nomination. And, you know, went on much further. But of course, you know, really swept most of the other contests.

Q: What was your -- What did you see as President Bush's strengths and weaknesses as a candidate? Because that's how you were going to be dealing with him if you got the nomination.

MELLMAN: Well, you know, he had tremendous strengths, and I will say I said to my colleagues and Senator Kerry when I was talking about taking the job, I said, "Look, I believe that George Bush is going to be reelected. And I'm willing to do everything and everything I can to prevent that and to elect John Kerry, but you should know that you have a pollster who believes that's the less likely outcome. And if you can't abide that, you know, know it and don't hire me." But --

Q: What did he say?

MELLMAN: [00:30:00] Wanted me on the team, so that was great. All of which to say, I think Bush had tremendous assets as a candidate. Honestly, not so much at a personal level, though, let me rephrase that, that's not quite true. He had tremendous assets. First and foremost, he was the incumbent president, and incumbent president going for a second party term. Right? Yes. And only once before in the last century has an incumbent going for a second party term been defeated, and that was Jimmy Carter in 1980. Very hard to -- Very hard feat to accomplish. So, he had history on his side, and that's really about incumbency and so on. Second, he was [00:31:00] the September 11 president. That is to say, this was the first presidential election post-September 11. It was an election where terrorism and those issues were very much on the front burner and became even more on the front burner late in the game. And he, again, you can argue, one can argue about whether he did the right thing or did anything or whatever, but he was certainly seen by the public as strong and able to deal with those -- with terrorism. The truth is, I think anybody who would have been president on September 11 would have responded in a fairly similar way, at least on the things that he got positive credit for, and would have been the same position. But he was the person who was president then, and he did get the credit. So, that's, you know, also a



tremendous asset. Third, you know, while people -- you know, elite -- sort of make fun of him in some ways, and the public, you know, certainly [00:32:00] saw some of his foibles and so on, he was seen as a regular guy who was in touch with people. So, he had some tremendous assets. He also had some liabilities. The economy wasn't great -- the truth is, it was good enough to get an incumbent reelected, but it wasn't great in some ways. Second, the war was becoming unpopular. It was not that unpopular then, but it was becoming unpopular. And so, the liabilities were mainly in the future; the assets were the here and now.

Q: And with the war in Iraq, I mean, how much did the initial popularity of the war and the initial military success in the war, preceded by, you know, the movement to go to war, how much did that shape the way the Democratic field was sort of dealing with the war in office? I know, you know, October [00:33:00] 2002, the vote on the authorization to use military force in Iraq, and seemed like all the Democrats who were thinking of running for president who were in Congress, including Kerry, ended up voting for that and had explanations later on. But basically, they were on -- they operated on the assumption that this was the move that needed to be made, or that politically, it was going to be the only defensible road?

MELLMAN: And, look, there's a substantive -- I don't think anybody looks at a vote like that primarily in political terms. People look at it in substantive terms, primarily. There were certainly very distinguished party leaders who were known for their political savvy, who shall remain nameless but who were saying to everyone that would listen, "No one's going to be elected president who doesn't vote yes on the authorization to use force."

Q: Party leaders [00:34:00] in Congress or outside, all over?

MELLMAN: All over. So, that was the sort of conventional wisdom at the time the vote was taken. But again, I don't think it was mainly a political thing. I talked to Senator Kerry about it, and look, I mean, I think he said at the time -- if you look at his speech on the floor -- he had been told that there are weapons of mass destruction. He believed that if there were weapons of mass destruction, that warranted action in the absence of Saddam Hussein's failure to get rid of those weapons of mass destruction. It turns out that in fact, obviously, there weren't weapons of mass destruction, but Saddam Hussein had wanted everyone to believe there were weapons of mass destruction. And why he wanted everyone to believe that, even to the point of being invaded, will remain for history to resolve that conundrum. But in any event, he wanted people to believe he had



weapons of mass destruction. He didn't, and [00:35:00] we -- you know, the United States -- got suckered in or sucked in to that, on that basis. Had it not been for the weapons of mass destruction, I don't think Senator Kerry would have voted yes, but then it becomes sort of, how do you explain that to people? Given that they're not finding weapons of mass destruction, how do you explain that to people? And particularly how to explain it in the context of a Democratic primary electorate, which is different than the general electorate, in the sense that the Democratic primary electorate is already extraordinarily anti-war by the time you get to the primary, but the overall public is not, and certainly, the swing voters are not overwhelmingly anti-war. So, it became some difficult shoals, politically, but... And, you know, had things going on a little while longer, well, did hurt Bush more, and might have had a different outcome had the election been [00:36:00] three months later, six months later, whatever. But it wasn't. It was when it was.

Q: You said that when you joined the campaign, if you'd had to bet, you would have bet that Bush will be reelected. Part of that was because of fundamentals, yeah?

MELLMAN: Right.

Q: What are the indices that would tell you the president is ripe for being defeated? You know, based on previous experience.

MELLMAN: Well, incumbents are really never ripe for being defeated, especially when you may have a two-term limit here, especially when they're going for that second party term, and not the third or fourth party term. If they're going for the third or fourth party term, then you have incumbents, and that was George Bush the father's case, was defeated. He was running for a fourth party term at that point, not a second, not even a third, but a fourth. Which is, you know, that's hard to do. That makes you more ripe for defeat. Second, [00:37:00] you have to look at the economic circumstances and again, the economy was not great, but it was not so bad as to preclude a president from being reelected. I mean, in fact, if my recollection serves -- and it may not -- the economy was in better shape than it was when President Obama was reelected as an incumbent, depending on exactly how you measure things, and so on. But so, incumbents, again, certainly running for a second party term, are really never really ripe for defeat.

Q: Was there a time during your involvement in the campaign when you thought, "Now, I think we are going to win," or, "If we do these things, we're going to win"?

MELLMAN: Yes. I thought there was a time, there was one time when I thought we were going to win. It was election night, when the exit poll people called me and told me that we were winning Ohio and Florida and various and sundry other places.



And they said, “There’s really little doubt about it.” So, once they told me that, that’s the first time I believe we [00:38:00] were going to win. (laughter) And when they started changing those projections, I went back to my previous viewpoint.

Q: What is it with exit polls? Because, I mean, they were spectacularly wrong, and you think of these as massive-sample polls of people who are actually voting, you don’t have to guess, are they likely voters or not. Had you historically suspected exit polls? Was this an outlier in being so wildly off the mark?

MELLMAN: Well, it wasn’t really. I mean, exit polls get a bad rap, I think, and first of all, I worked for CBS during the election nights, usually. Not that year because I was working on the campaign. And I’m sort of watching those exit polls, and I sat there all night, was it in 2000, you know, all night because the calls and the pulled back, and so on and so forth. And so, saw the failures of the exit polls up close and had studied the studies of those failures, so I was intimately familiar with the [00:39:00] prospects for failure. But in some sense, they get a bad rap because part of what’s happening here is that people are looking at these early exit polls and saying, “Well, they’re wrong.” Well, you know, if you went to Detroit and said, you know, “Give me that car off the line,” and they said, “Well, wait a second, it’s not done yet,” you know, “We haven’t installed all the parts yet, it’s still on the line,” you said, “Well, no, give it to me anyway,” and then complained that it didn’t work, that’d be sort of silly. And the same thing is true here: they’re not made to work until they’re done, and a lot of the stuff that goes around that people get hooked on and talk about really is before they’re done. So, that’s one problem. A second problem is that there are some known biases of exit polls. One of the biases is that they’re biased towards Democrats, for various reasons, and there is a method for correcting that, which they actually employ, but again, it takes some real data, [00:40:00] real election data, to make those corrections. And so, the fact is, they’re just a lot more accurate, you know, later than they are earlier. And the earlier you get the information, the less accurate it is. In this case, you know, first of all, you have the triumph of hope over experience, but you also have some, you know, people who are sitting there at the desks watching this data, saying, “Oh, it looks pretty strong to me.” So, you know, you sort of trust those people a little bit, but there’d have been lots of good reasons not to.

Q: So, that was the one time when you thought --

MELLMAN: The one time.

Q: Well, let me take a different tack, here.



MELLMAN: And honestly, I wasn't even sure of that. I can't remember, they were saying we were winning one of those states, first, then they said both, both Ohio and Florida. It was only when they said both did I really think because, OK, well, you know, maybe we'll lose one of them, but if we win either one of them, we're fine.
[00:41:00]

Q: Right. Let's take it back even as late as Super Tuesday, because then it's clear to all that Kerry's going to be the nominee, but he's broke, essentially. Now, I know you're on the spending side, but there wasn't much money to spend.

MELLMAN: Correct.

Q: And meanwhile, the Bush people --

MELLMAN: Are going crazy.

Q: -- were able to raise all kinds of money for the nominating contest and they didn't spend any of it getting the nomination. Tons of money.

MELLMAN: Exactly.

Q: And what are they doing in that spring of '04, and is it working?

MELLMAN: They're beating the heck out of Senator Kerry, and it is working. Not in totally dramatic form, but it's working enough to create real problems, not only then, but later. And to seed problems which sprout even more dramatically later. So, they're spending money, they're attacking us on television, [00:42:00] at a point when we can't respond in similar terms. And that was a huge problem from the get-go.

Q: What were the -- What's the case that would be made by the Bush campaign?

MELLMAN: The flip-flop case, at that point, if I remember correctly.

Q: And you know, this (inaudible) example, that, from a Republican standpoint, was March 17, speaking in West Virginia, Senator Kerry says, "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it."

MELLMAN: Right. Now, they were attacking that, and again, part of the point is they were attacking that angle before, I believe, on television before Senator Kerry said that, and then had that unfortunate turn of phrase which fueled the attack even more. And it was very fortunate, from their point of view, very unfortunate from ours, because it reinforced the story that they were trying to tell.

Q: Did you feel, as a campaign strategist, that there are things that Senator
[00:43:00] Kerry is prone to do that are playing into their hands?

MELLMAN: Well, "prone" is the wrong word, but things that were done, that did, yes, that's an example. You know, as I said before, everybody -- I mean, as I said before, Senator Kerry's incredible intelligent and articulate, and he proved that, I think,



beyond all doubt in the debates, as I suggested before. On the other hand, can he get himself in verbal knots? And the answer is also yes, he had done that before. What was particularly problematic in this case was, as I said, that it was right on, in a way that reinforced the message, the story that they were trying to tell on the other side, and so it made it vastly more important than it would have been if they were trying to say he was too liberal. And he'd say that, it wouldn't have had the same resonance by any stretch of the imagination. So, it was an unfortunate confluence of events.

Q: Also during the spring, you've got a lot of money that pre-McCain-Feingold, might have gone [00:44:00] in to the parties in the form of soft money, it's now going to these newly prominent, at least, 527 independent groups. Some of which are spending a lot of money on behalf of Senator Kerry, I know, with no coordination. But how did you feel within the campaign? These groups are spending a lot of money, running a lot of ads, making arguments to help your campaign, at least intended to. Were they helping, were they the right kind of ads, are they the kind you'd have made if you'd been allowed to?

MELLMAN: Well...

Q: They were very much anti-Bush, as I recall, rather than pro-Kerry.

MELLMAN: Yeah. I remember them later on. I don't remember really what they were doing in that spring, just honestly don't remember. But you know, it's really very hard to reshape attitudes towards an incumbent president. The volume [00:45:00] of information that people have about that incumbent president is huge, and each incremental drop of information they get from an ad is a very small proportion of what they know about that individual because they experienced him in these cases, as president for many years. They see the news, he's on it every night, and so on and so forth. The impact of that information on a relatively less well known candidate like Senator Kerry is much bigger because each of those sort of droplets of information constitutes a much larger share of the overall proportion of information they have about Senator Kerry. So, at that point, it was very important to us to shore up Senator Kerry's image. And that's why -- And we didn't have the resources to do that. It's why we made the convention, frankly, somewhat more about Senator Kerry than about Bush.

Q: So, the convention is in July, I think the second half of July. [00:46:00] March, April, May, June, first week or so of July, are there things that you're doing then that you think are helping to get out the information about Kerry that will cause voters to change their perception of him?



MELLMAN: Well, certainly the convention was designed to do that in a variety of ways. You know, there are a few points where we overdid it. Not “we,” but individuals overdid it, perhaps.

Q: Maybe set the stage here: what was your goal or goals for the convention?

MELLMAN: Well, I -- the goal for the convention was, I think, first and foremost to pass the national security test. And second, to introduce Senator Kerry to people as somebody who understood their problems, cared about them, and was focused on their economic plight as well as on -- as passing that national security test. [00:47:00] I think those were the two, as I recall, those were the two major goals we had going into the convention. And so, there were a lot of things that we did at the convention to further that. Everything from the generals that we had on the stage and -- to endorse him and talk about him and so on, to his own speech, to the swift boat veterans. You know, all those kinds of things, I mean, who had served with him, all of those things were done to try and accomplish those goals.

Q: What worked best and what fits into the category of overdone?

MELLMAN: Well, you know, my own personal view, somebody else, another Vietnam veteran, suggested to him to start with that, you know, “Reporting for duty” salute. It was perhaps a little over the top. I know some people thought it was, some people thought it wasn’t, but... So, [00:48:00] if there’s something I would identify as potentially over the top at the convention, that was probably it. But I think the convention worked relatively well for us in achieving both of those goals. You know, unfortunately, some people had put out the notion that we should be ahead by 10 points or something after the convention, and that just wasn’t going to happen. It just was not a realistic goal for us after the convention. But I think we did, importantly, though not completely, accomplish the objectives we set for ourselves. I mean, the other issue was the timing of the convention, and again, there’s just, you know, that’s fate, and you know, you try and -- people who set the time, it wasn’t us, but set it based on the experience of four years before, and sort of you’re always fighting the last war. And so, July’s way too early to do these conventions. [00:49:00] And now, they’re in September for all intents and purposes, and so, everyone sort of learned that lesson, that July’s a bad time. But unfortunately, we were stuck in the learning curve.

Q: You’ve got this big lump -- the Olympics, right? -- so you’ve got to be before it or after it.

MELLMAN: Right.



- Q: So, you all went before. I wonder, this is more a question about the electorate, I guess, because you say people thought you should have gotten a big bounce. You didn't get a big bounce. You got a --
- MELLMAN: Well, I shouldn't say people thought -- there were individuals who said to the press we should.
- Q: Is that because there are fewer votes up for grabs now? Is it because the electorate is more locked into partisanship and there are fewer sort of --
- MELLMAN: That's the main reason.
- Q: That's the main reason?
- MELLMAN: Yeah. People are just, you know, there's fewer people to move around.
- Q: Yeah. Something we didn't talk about, and that is the selection of John Edwards for vice president. Did you do any polling in advance on different vice presidential possibilities? [00:50:00]
- MELLMAN: Yes.
- Q: Would you care to describe the reasons --
- MELLMAN: Not really. (laughter)
- Q: Did Edwards show up well in those polls?
- MELLMAN: Yes, certainly.
- Q: And did you have a recommendation for who it should be?
- MELLMAN: Yeah. That part, I think I'd rather leave off the record, as it is.
- Q: OK. But the choice is made. Can you explain why Kerry chose Edwards?
- MELLMAN: Well... The most important reason, I think, is what seemed to be their personal connection. That's always the most important reason, and it was, I think, here, too. Obviously, as I said, things... Edwards did things later that proved he was sort of a different kind of guy [00:51:00] than he might have seemed at the time, but he hadn't done those things at that point in time, so you know, you can't judge him based on what he's going to do. We don't have that information. But you know, he seemed like I think he and Senator Kerry had a connection, which was important. But you know, from a political point of view, I'd say this: at some level, the best thing you can hope for from -- the most important thing for a vice president is to do no harm, OK? The second thing is, can he win his state or her state? And North Carolina was a state which was potentially in play. Obviously, by the time we got to Obama, it was in play, but was potentially in play at that point. And it is the one state that, if Kerry had one, he [00:52:00] would be president. One state from which these potential vice presidential candidates came from that was sufficient by itself to make him president. So, North Carolina



loomed large. And there's always the hope that, you know, he can bring North Carolina. It became pretty clear fairly quickly, unfortunately, that that was not going to be the case, to his -- the senator's great chagrin. But... So, that's a second factor. The third sort of political factor is that he was extraordinarily well known by that point and extraordinarily popular, and you know, seen as reinforcing the message that we had of being on the side of the average person, and so on.

Q: The North Carolina thing is interesting because did you just miscalculate there and assume that he would do more to bring North Carolina within the fold than he was able to do?

MELLMAN: Well, I'm not sure it was a miscalculation so much as it was a hope [00:53:00] that, you know, that he might be able to do that. Again, I mean, no one of these things by itself is the reason. It's not as if sort of nothing else, it was just about North Carolina, but you sort of look at all the factors and you say, "Well, if he can bring North Carolina..." Let's put it this way: Dick Gephardt, who I say I love dearly, is not going to bring North Carolina. He may bring Missouri, but Missouri was not enough to win. North Carolina was enough to win. So, you know, that's really the kind of calculation, it's that part of the calculation. But the... And, you know, Joe Lieberman, you know, Connecticut would be there anyway, so you weren't going to win, you know, Senator Kerry was going to win Connecticut regardless of whether Lieberman was on the ticket or not. So, at that level, you're not making guesses, completely, but you're making some rational calculation. And the calculation, you know, as I say, [00:54:00] it soon became clear that that was not going to be sufficient, and then we sort of pulled out of North Carolina for all intents and purposes. And we stayed there a little bit longer because -- than we probably should have because Senator Edwards was now on the ticket and was the vice presidential candidate and it was his state and he wanted to work longer and harder there than probably was justified. But nonetheless, it was, you know, it was worth a try and it didn't work.

Q: Before we get to the Republican convention, another question about the voters. How did --

MELLMAN: Sorry, it was worth a try and it didn't work -- nobody thought it was a sure thing by any stretch of the imagination.

Q: Oh, I understand that. Another question about the voters. I've seen you quote as saying -- and maybe I'm not getting it just right -- that if you ask voters, "What are you most concerned about," they would talk about their economic situation. If



you ask voters, the same voters, "What should the president be most concerned about," they had a different answer. Am I getting this right? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MELLMAN: I think so. National security was the -- Yeah, yeah, yeah. So --

Q: That's very interesting because I think that -- I think most people assume [00:55:00] that voters care about something, they want that to be the thing the president cares about the most.

MELLMAN: Yeah, well, and not necessarily. In this case, obviously, people were saying something different about what they were more interested and what they thought the president should be most focused on. Part of that stems from what they see government is doing, as to say they think government is in charge of protecting us. They don't think the government is in charge of the economy, for good reason. Governments, you know, if the government could control the economy, we would be in a very different position today than we are. So, people are not foolish in making that calculation; they know that, you know, the government is the only thing that's there defending them and protecting them from terrorism and from overseas, whereas the government's not the only operative, the only factor operative in the economy. Second, there's a question of the candidates and the differences between the candidates. You know, did people really see one [00:56:00] as better than the other, in terms of dealing with those problems? And that's a second factor. So, both those dimensions are important. But, you know, the national and security issues obviously were there and weighed heavily because of September 11, because of Iraq and Afghanistan. But also -- and this is a little -- I may be getting ahead of your schedule here, but very little remarked on even in the immediate aftermath of the election, except by me, but actually very important at the time. Not even remembered today, and that's Beslan, the terrorist attack at Beslan, in the Soviet Union. Or was it then the Soviet Union?

Q: Chechnya.

MELLMAN: Chechnya, yeah. But in any event, you know, here was people's worst nightmare. They were watching a terrorist take over a school and shoot children and shoot them in the back as they're running away, by the scores, if I remember correctly. It was [00:57:00] right on the eve of the Republican convention. It was the attention, despite the fact that we don't talk about it now, we forget about it completely, the level of attention that people paid to that story was, if I remember correctly, almost as great as the level of tension they paid to the conventions.



And so, here you had this tremendous story that put widely viewed, widely watched, and viscerally dramatic story of children being killed by terrorists, right on the eve of the Republican convention, for which the message was, “You need a president who’s tough on terrorism, knows how to deal with it, and George Bush is that person. So, it really -- in and of itself, it would put the issue back on the agenda in a very significant way, (inaudible), and it set the stage for the Republican convention that was almost solely focused on that issue. And so, that’s one of those circumstances that nobody except the Chechens, [00:58:00] I guess, have any control over. But I’m sure they didn’t time it for the Republican convention.

Q: But it really teed up the theme of the convention. I mean, I know during the fall campaign, Senator Kerry really tried to say, in effect, whatever you think of President Bush’s performance after 9/11, he’s failed the Commander in Chief test, in Iraq, Osama Bin Laden’s still out there, did voters, when they perceived Bush, distinguish as much as you would have liked between protecting us against terrorists and making an investment in a war that was becoming increasingly frustrating?

MELLMAN: Well, they did make a distinction, but they thought George Bush would protect them from terrorism. They were, as I say, turning against the war and his performance in Iraq, but not yet in dramatic fashion. And so, one was a clear positive, [00:59:00] the other was not yet a clear negative.

Q: You know, during the nominating campaign, Senator Kerry, all the Democrats -- or most of the Democrats, I guess -- decided not to take the federal money and observe the spending limits, right? Maybe that’s because Dean raised so much money early. But in the fall campaign, both parties accepted the --

MELLMAN: Well, also because if I recall correctly, there are limits on what you can spend in each state as well that go in the primary process. And we couldn’t win Iowa and New Hampshire with the spending limits that existed for Iowa and New Hampshire.

Q: Fall campaign, both parties take the \$75 million from the federal government.

MELLMAN: Yes.

Q: But because your convention’s been over a month earlier, you’ve got to make that stretch for three months, and the Republicans only have to make it stretch --

MELLMAN: Another problem with the July date, yeah.



- Q: So, did you find during the fall campaign that if we only had the money, you know, we could do certain things that you thought would have made the difference in a close election? [01:00:00]
- MELLMAN: Well --
- Q: Because you're in the spending side, but if they say, "We don't have the money."
- MELLMAN: Right, exactly. It certainly limited our ability to do what we wanted to do immediately after the convention and in those weeks. I don't want to say because I can't remember exactly, but we were not -- I don't want to say we were dark because I can't remember that, but the bottom line is, we did not have the level of spending that we would have wanted to have, you know, from the convention through election day because we had it divided over a much larger period of time.
- Q: And in between the conventions, you've got the swift boat becoming a big, national story, right? Swift Boat Veterans For Truth attacking Senator Kerry at what had been thought of as, you know, his greatest --
- MELLMAN: Strength, right.
- Q: -- one of his greatest strengths. Can you talk about when that happened, how you all decided how to react to it, whether you reacted effectively? Tell the swift boat story from the Kerry [01:01:00] point of view.
- MELLMAN: Well, I can only tell it from my point of view, so... (laughter)
- Q: OK, or the campaign.
- MELLMAN: Well, not even, I can't even tell it from the whole camp. There were differences of opinion in the campaign, I can tell you that for sure, that led to pretty tough, some tough meetings. It was fairly evident fairly quickly in the polling that this was having a significant impact. It was clear that this was having a significant impact pretty quickly. Clear to me, I should say. And therefore, it was clear to me we should be doing more about it. Now, there's some people who would say, "Well, Kerry didn't do anything about it." That's not true. Lots was done about it. The question was how much to do and in what form, and so on and so forth. But it was clear to me that more should be done, much more should be done. There are other people who argued quite vociferously [01:02:00] that A, Kerry had been attacked in all his previous races on something to do with foreign policy and military service, and it always boomeranged, and so it would here, too. Second, that the story was just not getting that much attention in circulation. These guys were on cable, you know, etc. And so, we would only elevate the story and make it bigger if we did something big about it. And that was the basic -- there might have been some other issues -- debate in the campaign. As I say, it is not the case



that nothing was done. A lot was done. The question was how much more. I thought there should be much more done because it was evident to me that it was having an impact. Others disagreed, and they sort of won the day, at least for a while.

Q: What would the more have been, if your advice had been taken?

MELLMAN: Well, again, I [01:03:00] hesitate just out of memory, just in terms of failure of memory, to tell you exactly what the steps were. But, you know, I thought, you know, we should have been much bigger about it. Senator Kerry should have taken it on personally, that we should have brought those other resources of his compatriots, his crew, etc., with him to take that on directly and personally at his level. Perhaps in advertising as well and so on -- paid advertising -- to be able to amplify that message.

Q: Can we turn to the debates?

MELLMAN: Mm-hmm.

Q: And I know there's always negotiations before the debates, and what is it that you wanted in way of the format, number of debates, when they would be?

MELLMAN: You know, honestly, I was not involved in the negotiations themselves. We had discussions about what we wanted, but I honestly don't remember the specifics.

Q: OK. Well, what did you hope to [01:04:00] accomplish in those debates?

MELLMAN: To win. No, (laughter) well, look, I mean, I think we wanted to be able to do two things. First of all, deliver our message. Second, and be able to demonstrate to people that Senator Kerry would be a better president than President Bush, that he had the gravitas, had the ability to be president. And as I say, I think he demonstrated that in grand fashion. As I think I said before, I don't think there's ever been a time when a challenger beat an incumbent president in all three debates as far as the polls are concerned. The problem is winning a debate's not the same thing as winning an election, and you can win the debates without winning the election, and that's what we did. But, I think the debates were a tremendous success.

Q: Is there a pattern? I mean, you've been involved in a lot of campaigns. Is there a pattern to incumbent presidents in the first debate almost invariably screwing up because they just [01:05:00] don't want to do the homework?

MELLMAN: Be there. Well, I don't want to say... I can think of several examples, (laughter) let me put it that way, whether it's a clear pattern, I guess I haven't looked at it carefully enough to know. But there's certainly a number of examples. But in this case, it wasn't just the first debate. I mean, the first debate was, you know,



certainly a great victory for Kerry, but the other two were, too, and that was not the case, say, with President Obama, who by most accounts didn't do so well in the first debate, but certainly by the second and third, did. That was not the case with President Bush.

Q: Well, you said earlier, and I think it's still applicable, that every new increment of information about a president is just adding, you know, a grain of sand to the beach, and are people still learning about Kerry?

MELLMAN: Oh, very much so, very much so. Most people, you know, they knew the name and they had some basic, you know, like this, but they didn't have much texture. They didn't have much information. [01:06:00] There are a lot of people that, you know, before the convention, a lot of people didn't know he had been in Vietnam, for example. By the end of the convention, many people knew that. But you know, these things are not necessarily even the basics of background and positions and so on for these challenges, are not widely known.

Q: Now, the Bush people will say, "All right, regardless of, you know, who won each debate, what people remembered about the debates was Mary Cheney, global tests," in other words, they feel like they were able to take the extracts from those debates and turn them into political gold. What do you say to that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

MELLMAN: I think they turned it into political bronze, not gold. Look, I mean, you know, yes, it's true that they did a good job with that. I don't take that away from them. [01:07:00] That didn't decide the election, nor did it even decide people's positions on the debate. You know... At the end of the day, I just don't think things turned on those snippets. But you know, there are certainly -- they certainly did do an effective job trying to mitigate the victories that Senator Kerry had in the debates with those individual nuggets.

Q: This is just speculating, but back to the Edwards choice, was part of the calculus that having been such a successful trial lawyer, thinking on his feet, connecting with, you know, jurors and so on, that he would wipe up the floor with Vice President Cheney?

MELLMAN: Well, that's a little too strong, but as I said before, I mean, I think there was a sense that he -- and look, it wasn't just as a trial lawyer. He demonstrated this on the campaign trail, in the primaries, he was a compelling speaker and did a great job in using his speaking and using his oratory skills to generate [01:08:00] a significant following.



Q: The Kerry campaign, did you see the general election as a national campaign, or as a series of state campaigns?

MELLMAN: Series of state campaigns, very much.

Q: Could you talk about that?

MELLMAN: Sure. We had, you know, the winners write history, as you know, and so... So, they get all the plaudits for the technological achievements and so on, but one of the things that we did which was later copied by the Obama campaign, but we were the first that ever did it, to my knowledge, we developed a simulation model that fed in all the polling data, both ours and the public data, and historical voting information, economic information, all sorts of information, into a model. And we ran, I think it was 200,000, maybe 600,000, I can't remember exactly, [01:09:00] simulations a week and used that to allocate our resources state by state. And so, what we were looking for is you run those simulations, how often is that state pivotal, that is, both close and decisive? And that, you could go through a lot of math, but at the end of the day, what you prove is that percentage is roughly the percentage of your effort you should devote to that state. And so, we looked at it very much as a state by state contest. We updated these simulations each week, ran several hundred thousand each week, and then based on that, made resource allocations week by week. Both in terms of money and in terms of candidate time. And at the end, as was evident, you know, Florida and Ohio emerged as the places that were the most pivotal. And not the only places, but the places that were most pivotal. But anyway, we were certainly look at it as a state by state [01:10:00] contest. Second, we did a whole micro-targeting effort as well in the -- on our side. We had much less time to prepare for it and much less time to experiment with it. You know, if someone -- we didn't get the keys to the DNC database until, I can't remember exactly, but quite late in the process because we weren't --

Q: After the convention?

MELLMAN: It might have been before the convention, but I mean, they had it for four years on their side. We didn't even have it for a year. So, it was before the convention, I'm pretty sure, but it was not...

Q: It was not in March? Not in April?

MELLMAN: No, it wasn't in March, right, right. Yes, it wasn't in July, either, but it was somewhere in between. So, the -- in any event, with that data, we put together micro-targeting models that gave us a sense, in each state that was a target state, what was our likelihood of winning? And sorry, not winning, [01:11:00] what was



the likelihood of each voter being a swing voter? And we wanted our state directors to use that information for targeting. Tremendous resistance on the part of a lot of them, even those who later complained about the fact that the Republicans had this sort of technological advantage. Some of those were the same people that refused to use the same technology that we gave them, that the Republicans were using, and we didn't quite have the same command and control structures to force them to use it, that they did on the president's side. So, and indeed, we were criticized. The Kerry campaign was criticized quite a bit during and after the campaign for not running a 50-state campaign, for being a targeted campaign, but it always eluded me as to why that was, what the substance of that critique was. Had we spent more in North Dakota, would we have somehow won? I don't really understand what the argument was. But in any event, we looked at it very much as a state by state effort.

Q: And did you have state-specific [01:12:00] ads, state-specific ad buys?

MELLMAN: I believe almost all of our ad buys were state-specific. Indeed, to the point that we -- the Bush campaign had both national cable and specific state buys, and one of the outgrowths of that that we didn't think about until we got a little warning was that in the State of Hawaii, which is a pretty Democratic state, the Bush ads were showing on cable and we were not. So, Bush was, like, catching up in Hawaii. And we did a poll in Hawaii, we found that was the case, we sent somebody -- I can't remember who, but we sent some people to Hawaii. And it was all fine in the end, but that was just sort of, "Oh, wow, there's a place where that sort of leakage makes a difference," as a result of their national cable buy. But in any event, almost all of our buying, I think, all of it really was state-specific. Our ads were state-specific. Now, did we use some ads in different states? Yes, in -- Sorry, did we use the same ad in some different states? Yes, but we had a lot of [01:13:00] very state-specific advertising and very few ads were used everywhere. We had state-specific ad teams, so we had a variety of people working on ads, and those people were assigned to specific states and working on those states, and, you know, primarily on those states. So, the ad buys were done on a state by state basis, the ad design and development was done on a state by state basis, and the polling was done on a state by state basis to support that advertising, the advertising strategy.

Q: Did you think that you could win with less than a plurality of popular votes, the way Bush won in 2000? Had that sort of made it OK to get an electoral vote majority and neglect the national popular vote majority?



- MELLMAN: Well, it's not a question of being OK, it's a question of what the Constitution says. And so, you know, [01:14:00] we'd be delighted to have a popular vote majority, but it wouldn't matter if we did. We needed an electoral vote majority. And so, that's what we were focused on. And bringing up that, you know, we could have perhaps gotten a few more popular votes in California, but it wouldn't have, you know, made John Kerry president. So, you know, we were focused really in that way. It wasn't a question of OK or not; it was the reality.
- Q: Since the polls most people saw then, you know, sort of pre-Nate Silver, were national polls -- Go ahead.
- MELLMAN: And what we were doing was exactly what Nate Silver later did, which was aggregate these polls, both on a national and a state by state basis, both on their own and in the context of this overall simulation model.
- Q: Did your model have a figure for if we get this percent of the national popular vote, we will have our electoral vote majority?
- MELLMAN: Yes, but the truth is, at that point -- it's changed -- but at that point, getting a popular vote, [01:15:00] getting an electoral vote majority actually -- the number that guarantees a Democratic electoral vote majority is actually more than 50%.
- Q: OK.
- MELLMAN: That's changed, and now it's the other way around. We can get a Democratic electoral vote majority by losing the popular vote. But in 2000, the demographics were such that that wasn't really possible.
- Q: How did you think the other side was doing? I mean, just as a professional, what did you think of the Bush campaign?
- MELLMAN: I thought they did a great job. (laughter)
- Q: Did you think that at the time?
- MELLMAN: Oh, yeah, yeah. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)
- Q: I know voter turnout overall was up significantly, but they went from 50 million to 59 million votes, from 2000 to 2004. Did that surprise you?
- MELLMAN: You know, no, not really. And look, I think this is overdone on the Obama side, too. The reality is, the programs that people had, [01:16:00] we know now from lots and lots and lots and lots of work, that the maximum impact programs can have, no matter how good, how targeted, how effective, you know, we're talking about a two or three-point difference in turnout. And you know, if you look at a place like Ohio, which was a critical place to look at, you know, the Kerry vote increased significantly --
- Q: Over Gore's vote?



MELLMAN: Over Gore's vote. And the Bush vote increased significantly. And there were just more voters for them than there were for us. That just was the reality. It wasn't, you know, yes, if you want to argue from the top down you can say, "Well, yes, there are a lot of people that didn't vote that were Democrats, and so, therefore we lost it on turnout." But the truth is, we -- the Kerry campaign -- got a lot more of those people to vote than had voted before, and the Obama campaign got even more of them, but there were things they were working with that we weren't, in turning out some of those folks. So, [01:17:00] you know, I don't think that the turnout operations or whatever, you know, made the difference. We lost Ohio because there were just more people voting for Bush than there were for Kerry, and that just, you know, it's a fundamental reality.

Q: Could you talk maybe in personal terms, part of your job is polling and it's more than a technical skill, but it is a technical skill, plus but also you're involved in strategy and so on. I mean, as the long campaign unfolds, I would think that things like exhaustion and just interpersonal irritation of the people you're working with and just the general tension of getting closer and closer to this enormously consequential decision, do those things affect performance, or do they have an effect?

MELLMAN: Well... There's no question one feels [01:18:00] exhausted. I did more all-nighters during the Kerry campaign than I did my entire college career combined, literally, and literally, even when it wasn't quite an all-nighter, we had a meeting every Sunday morning at the campaign, to sort of go over the week's planning, and I did a presentation for that meeting every week, where we did the simulations, we did the polling aggregation, we did all the things that we've talked about. And obviously, it had to be up to date and current, and so we, you know, were getting polling numbers in on Saturday night and, you know, putting them together for a presentation on Sunday morning. So, almost every Saturday night, I was here till 3:00, 4:00, 5:00 in the morning. And then at a meeting at, you know, nine o'clock or ten o'clock, whatever time it was, at the campaign. So, let alone the all-nighters on top of that. So, there's no question that exhaustion sets in. Now, [01:19:00] very few people, myself included, can look back and say, "Well, this exhaustion at this moment prohibited or inhibited performance in this particular way with that particular consequence," but we know enough from sort of general knowledge to know that when you're exhausted, like when you're drunk, your performance is inhibited. Now, exactly in what ways and what circumstances, to



what extent and with what consequence? That's harder to know, but you can't help it if it had some impact.

Q: But even in hindsight, you can't say, "Boy, if I had been fully on my game, I never would have done that or recommended that," or, "He never would have done that," or, "She never would have done that?"

MELLMAN: No, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Q: I guess it evens out, too, and the other side is presumably pulling all-nighters.

MELLMAN: Yeah, though they're richer and so they have... They're richer and they've had their team in place for a longer time, so you know, all those things sort of ease -- I'm sure they had plenty of all-nighters -- I think the [01:20:00] tension is always greater -- I shouldn't say the tension -- the level of exhaustion and stuff is greater on the challenger's side, when you just don't have the time and the resources.

Q: You mentioned the exit polls before, and we'll come back to election night, but the weekend before Election Day, were your own polls suggesting that you were going to win?

MELLMAN: No, that we were going to lose. Yes. We actually had it right on the nose in terms of the numbers, unfortunately. Before the weekend, we had been showing an uptick. We weren't ahead but we were, you know, moving in the right direction. There was then that Osama Bin Laden tape --

Q: Well, I was going to say, you mentioned Beslan, but then there's that Osama Bin Laden tape close to the eve of the election.

MELLMAN: Yes, I believe it was on the weekend, [01:21:00] or Thursday, Friday, something like that. And we definitely saw a downtick from there. We're talking about small ticks, small tick up, small tick down, you know, is it really that, is it sampling, I mean, it's really hard to know exactly what's going on there when you're looking short time frames like that and incidents, and so on. But there was probably some impact of that.

Q: When you've got that information and you read it in a particular way -- we're behind -- what do you do with that information at a time when, you know, other people probably need to be -- does it help motivate people? Do you worry about telling the candidate, "It looks like you're going to lose?" I just wonder what --

MELLMAN: Yeah, let me put it this way. You know, I didn't really talk to the candidate about it, but I mean, I did talk about it with the campaign because the question is, OK, yes, it's Saturday [01:22:00] or it's Sunday and the election's on Tuesday, but is there anything we can do? You have to have that discussion. You have to explore the possibilities, otherwise you're really -- it's really malfeasance. So, you have to



be complete and candid and honest with the campaign, even at that late date. And certainly, I was.

Q: Well, and what did you all decide we need to do in the 48 hours that are left? Were there any moves on the board?

MELLMAN: I'm sure there were and we did something. I honestly don't remember what.

Q: Again, before we get to election night, I want to ask you this: there were other elections going on in 2004, right, and --

MELLMAN: Sorry, let me just go back a half-step and say whatever we did or didn't do was not dispositive, (inaudible) not dispositive.

Q: Yeah.

MELLMAN: Sorry, other elections, [01:23:00] yeah.

Q: I don't know if a Democratic president has ever been elected without a Democratic Congress, certainly not in the twentieth century, and I wonder, when you're running your campaign, is that connecting in any way with the other Democratic congressional campaigns in particular? Were you thinking, "If we win, we want to win as leaders of a team and we'll have a Congress that will be Democratic as well, so we're going to do these things differently than if it was just us running?"

MELLMAN: Well, you know, yes and no. Did you want to have a Democratic Congress? Of course. Even if you don't win, you want to have a Democratic Congress, but certainly if you do win. So, yes, at that level. At another level, you got to run your own campaign, and there are ways in which we can cooperate. There are ways in which we can't cooperate, legally, and the truth is that cooperation was mostly out of -- the ways in which we could legally cooperate was mostly [01:24:00] out of my particular bailiwick, so I don't know that much about the details, honestly. But in my area, the potential for legal cooperation was much diminished because, for example, you can't share polling across --

Q: Really?

MELLMAN: -- local polling across, I believe, yes. In other words, I couldn't say to Congressman Smith, "Our poll in your district shows this," or Senator Y, they couldn't come to us and say, "Well, we polled you in our district and this is what it looks like." That'd be a legal violation.

Q: OK, so, election night. You think at one point you're going to win. How does the evening go --

MELLMAN: Brief point, yeah. (laughter)

Q: -- from there? I mean --



MELLMAN: Downhill.

Q: -- until Senator Kerry, does anybody tell Senator Kerry, "It looks like we're going to win?"

MELLMAN: Well, I was here. He was on the plane, and then going to Boston. I was in headquarters, here, [01:25:00] planning to go to Boston. Never made it. And... You know, basically, as I say, we had these sort of early reports, and let me go back, I said -- going back to something you were asking about before, there were other polls that showed us, individual polls that showed us ahead. Again, and if you aggregate all the polls as we did, if you look just at our own polling, it did not show us ahead. But there were other polls that did. So, people are always, you know, prefer to believe the good news than the bad news, and that's a struggle that we had. And we had people, you know, who are arguing for example that all the undecideds were going to break to us, and I did not believe that was the case. And so, our -- you -- but you know, you get this sort of muddle of uncertainty, and of course, the candidate's on the road and there's big crowds and Bruce Springsteen is playing and people are very excited, and so, you know, it's got a very happy sort of feel to it at that point. Unlike, you know, I mean, [01:26:00] I think the Bob Dole campaign would have had a very different experience, where they're behind in every poll and it's not really close, and so on. We had a sort of different ethos and feel to the campaign as a whole, even if there were some pessimists like myself that remained. But you know, in terms of election night, when we first got these, you know, good news, that as I say, for a few minutes changed my mind, but then we started to get worse news. And you know, look, then we got to the point where Ohio was it and there were a large number -- we understood a large number of ballots that had not been counted for various reasons in Ohio, and large enough to make a difference, potentially. And so, we were, because of the 2000 experience, we were very focused [01:27:00] on talking to the political directors at the various networks and so on, urging them not to call the state yet because of these uncounted ballots, and the possibility that things could shift. One of the things that I think 2000 showed is once they sort of say, "X is the president," Bush, in that case, it's very hard to sort of -- you know, then it's an uphill battle to, no matter what the facts are, it's an uphill battle to sort of change that perception. So, we wanted not to let that perception set. And you know, people were, I think, were because of the 2000, (inaudible) respectful of that. But there came a point where it was clear, but I never made it to Boston in part because I was sort of on the phone all night, trying to figure out what was



going on in Ohio, in the end. That was the decisive place, just as we had predicted.

Q: I've asked you everything I know to ask. Are there things that you remember about that campaign or about [01:28:00] politics in that period that I should have asked you about that would be helpful for people who watch this interview?

MELLMAN: Well, I don't know if it'll be helpful for anybody, and we've touched on it -- I mean, this was very importantly a national security election, and there were people who thought, well, we could change the narrative and make it an economic election, for example. As I said, there were two problems with that. One is it's very hard to change what people are thinking about in a fundamental way, especially when it's a result of real forces, it's not just what's on TV, it's there's a reality, we had September 11, we had wars going on. And so, it was very hard to sort of shift that narrative completely, and we had -- and the economic narrative was in fact not so negative as to preclude the reelection of a president. So, there were people who sort of looked at that election, say, "Well, John Kerry should have won it." The truth is, [01:29:00] he should not have won it, and I actually -- I write a column each week for *The Hill*, which is a Hill rag, newspaper on Capitol Hill, and I have to submit it on Monday and they run it on Wednesday. And so, I submitted it on Monday and they decided to -- I can't remember exactly, but basically I was sort of saying, "Look, I think Kerry's not going to be the winner here. I'm not sure. You know, you all know I didn't, but you know, if he wins, and these are the forces he will have overcome, which are pretty amazing." And so, the Republicans on -- somehow, the column got out early, and there's a story going out that Kerry's pollster on the eve of the election predicts he's going to lose, and so on. I don't know how I got to this point, but except to say that while people were optimistic and people thought [01:30:00] that -- there were people who thought Kerry should win, that was really never in the cards. If he had won, it would have been a tremendous upset. And the truth is, he came pretty close to winning, and I would argue closer to winning than by rights he should have, by rights in terms of the circumstances, than he should have. So, in that sense, you know, I think that he did a great job. I think the campaign did a great job. Not a great enough job -- you want to win, that's the goal -- but I think the circumstances were such that it was extraordinarily difficult to win, and as I say, that's a view I held all through the campaign.



Q: Two more questions that your answer sort of inspired. One is, is the old conventional wisdom that undecided voters break against the incumbent, is that bogus, as a generalization?

MELLMAN: Yes. And this was an argument that (inaudible) campaign, there were those people who were saying, "Well, these undecideds are going to break to us." I was saying no because the whole notion of undecideds breaking to the challenger are based on an [01:31:00] underlying structure. And the underlying structure is they're saying to themselves, "I know who this incumbent is and I don't want to vote for them. I don't know enough about this challenger to decide I want to vote for them, but by election day, I'm going to get something that will give me enough justification to vote for that challenger." In this case, the undecideds knew both candidates and detested both candidates, and detested them in roughly equal measure. So, there was no basis, it was not a situation where they were just sort of waiting to move one way or the other. They were going to divide the way the rest of the electorate divided, and they did.

Q: The other thing is, and this is, again, provoked by something I've read that came from your mouth, national security, economics, but you have said that there was also a huge cultural cleavage in the electorate this year -- social, moral, however you phrase it, that was more powerful than traditional notions of people vote their pocketbook. Do you still feel that way?

MELLMAN: Well, it's not just then, [01:32:00] I mean, I think we've seen this culture divide, you know, for a while. But yes, I mean, I think -- and it's not so much pocket, I'm going to be clear about this, it's not so much pocketbook voting as class voting. That is, culture more than class. Pocketbooks still matter, if the economy's going well, the incumbents are rewarded, if it's going poorly, they're punished, but the difference between sort of -- the difference between a lower middle class person votes and an upper class person votes are -- is far less than the difference between, say, a pro-choice and an anti-choice person vote. The cultural issues, and it's not just that, it's not just choice, it's that whole variety of cultural issues, tells you more about a person's likelihood of voting one way or another than does their place in the class spectrum. And as I say, it's not just abortion. If you asked about premarital sex, you'd have the same cultural cleavage, people who think premarital sex is OK vote Democrat, people who say premarital sex is not OK vote Republican. That's not an issue that's in the public [01:33:00] domain, it's not an issue that is -- has political roots or antecedents, but that cultural difference tells you more about someone's politics than does their class.



Q: And who did cultural issues benefit in '04?

MELLMAN: Well, I think the cultural issues, at that point, benefited the Republicans more than they benefited us, for two reasons. First of all, we were at the beginning of a cultural shift -- gay marriage, for one example, and again, I'm not one of those that said, "Oh, had the gay marriage thing not been on the ballot, Democrats would have one." I don't think that's true, but we were at the beginning of a cultural shift, and we were still on the somewhat conservative side of that -- of that cultural divide.

Q: When you say "on the ballot," state referendums?

MELLMAN: Yes, and Ohio was on the ballot, for example. But -- So, I don't think that issue being on the ballot was decisive, but I do think that, again, the cultural circumstances [01:34:00] tended to favor the Republicans in a way that they don't, that they favor us, now. And second, just the demography, which is separate but related issue, also. I mean, if the electorate had looked in 2004 like it looked in 2012, John Kerry would have won. But it didn't, just the fact of the matter. And that's not just a function of Obama polling people out; it's a function of the way the country looks. And again, that's separate from but related to that cultural divide as well.

Q: Well, thank you so much.

MELLMAN: Pleasure.

Q: This has been enormous -- and for somebody who said, you know, he didn't have a clear memory, you sure...

MELLMAN: Well, I hope it's been accurate.

Q: Sure brought it back.

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