



The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

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Current: Partner, Vianovo

In 2004: Strategist for Media Buying and Deputy to Matthew Dowd, Chief Campaign
Strategist for Bush-Cheney Re-Election Campaign

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Q: Mike Shannon, what -- where does your connection with George W. Bush begin?

When did you first get associated in any way with, I guess then Governor Bush?

SHANNON: Then-Governor Bush, it was early 2000, I was working in corporate finance, and was considering going to graduate school at the time, and a good friend of mine suggested that if I wanted to do something that I had a passion about, but had never done in my life before I went to grad school, that I should do it before I went to grad school, not after -- not try to pursue it after. And one of passions was politics, and so I began to think about what I might do, in that election year, and I actually went up to Washington to visit with some Senate and House offices, and everybody up there said the exact same thing to me. "What are you doing up here? Your governor's running for president, and you're a Republican. You need to turn back around [00:01:00] and go back down to Austin and find a way to get on that campaign." And so, I came back down -- I lived in Houston at the time -- and just started doing what everybody who gets on a presidential campaign does at the beginning, which is calling people, "Do you know so and so? Do you know anybody, do you know anybody on the campaign that knows somebody?" And a friend of a friend had a friend who worked on the strategy for George W. Bush's 2000 campaign, a guy names Israel Hernandez. And started calling up to talk to Israel, he was very busy, and a couple weeks went by, and finally I got him live on the phone one day, and he agreed to have lunch with me. And I drove from Houston to Austin, and after a, after an hour lunch, he said "We don't have any paid slots, but if you want to join as a volunteer on the strategy team, I think -- let



me talk to Karl [00:02:00] Rove, and see if he's OK with it, and you can start, and we'll kind of go from there, see if you can work your way onto staff." And I said, "When do you need me?" And this was on a Wednesday afternoon, and he said, "How about Monday morning?" And I said, "That's pretty fast." He said, "Well, you can -- there's plenty of couches to sleep on." So, I drove from Houston to Austin with my car packed on that Monday morning in I guess early March, it was right before Super Tuesday, right around when the primaries were coming to their climax in the year 2000. And started in a bullpen, essentially a giant cubicle with about eight other people in the strategy team; it was called the Lincoln Lounge. And that's where my career, politically and with President Bush, began.

Q: And the strategy group consisted of?

SHANNON: [00:03:00] So, you know, campaign to campaign, strategy groups have different functions. Almost always at their core is message development: what is this campaign about, broadly? Also, part of that, really hand in glove, is the advertising budget: TV, radio, print, internet. So what are we going to say, how are we going to say it on TV and online? In 2000, the strategy team also had the direct mail program, though by 2004, we shifted that over to the political group, and I think that has been where it's resided in most presidential campaigns recently. And to get to the message and the advertising core of the strategy team's activities is conducting all of the research --polling, focus groups, message testing. So, I began [00:04:00] working on that team, and was really not doing sophisticated stuff to start. I was answering phones, filing mail pieces, inventorying mail pieces. And my life on that campaign, and I guess really my life professionally going forward changed when one day, Karl Rove stuck his head out of his office and said, "Does anybody here know how to use PowerPoint?" And I stuck my head up, and I said, "I do." And that began a long partnership that I had with Karl, helping him put together his PowerPoints, which he used to brief everybody on the campaign strategy, from big funders to the field staff to eventually Secretary Cheney at the convention in Philadelphia that year in 2000. And the other thing that happened to me is that a guy started showing up at the campaign, and sitting in the Lincoln [00:05:00] Lounge right next to me, asking me for help. He'd say, "Can you help me track these media buys? Can you help me do a PowerPoint on this polling? Can you start tracking some polls for me?" And that was Matthew Dowd, and a couple -- about a month after he started showing up in the Lincoln Lounge, he took the office next to Karl. And so I began to work as Matthew's deputy. He was in charge of polling and media buying for the 2000 campaign. And started -- you know, spent most of the 2000 campaign focused on polling and media buying, working with Karl on his strategy presentations, and also in 2000, the internet was in its infancy, politically for sure, but really just in its infancy for, you know, as a medium. And we had an email program and a website,



and so I worked on the digital team as well. Kind of thinking through what we might do with our email program, what we might do [00:06:00] with our website.

Q: Fast forwarding to the end of the 2000 campaign, what did you learn from that experience individually, but also what did the Bush campaign team learn from that experience that sort of shaped the planning for 2004?

SHANNON: Well, that campaign was one that seemed to go on forever for us on staff, because of the Florida recount. And we got to election night, which was on November 7, and we had a motto in the Lincoln Lounge that we'll sleep November 8. And of course, late on November 7, or maybe early on November 8, it became apparent that we weren't going to be sleeping. And planes started leaving for Florida, and we got into a long recount that didn't conclude until December. And it was a little bit -- [00:07:00] I always describe it like, it was like we had been running a marathon, and we crossed the finish line, and then they said, "You've got to keep running." And you ask, "Well, when's it going to be over? Is it two miles, is it three miles?" And they said, "We don't know." And so, I think part of what we learned in 2000, which you know philosophically and you say, is that every vote actually does count. And that everybody on the campaign, whether it's the fundraising team or the treasury team or the political team or the strategy team or the communications team, each person's role is very important, because at the end of the day, we were down to 537 votes in Florida. And I think something I learned, and a lot of the strategy team learned, is that presidential campaigns are largely shaped in different windows of time. Though they're very long, there are moments in time that can move the race significantly. [00:08:00] And so as we saw the ebb and flow of 2000 come and go, we saw how important the conventions were, we saw how important the debates were, we saw how important unexpected events were, like the video that was released just a couple days before the election -- well, I guess it wasn't a video; it was the news about Governor Bush's drunk driving arrest. And we were going into that weekend with a lot of momentum, felt really good, *Larry King Live* was Ross Perot on Thursday night, he was going to be endorsing Governor Bush. A wonderful story about this former presidential candidate who had been a foe of his father's endorsing George W. Bush going into Election Day. That was really lost; that's kind of a footnote to history now. No one I talk to remembers [00:09:00] that. And so we learned about the impact of these high moments that we need to focus enough resources and thought on those moments. Really commensurate with what the impact that they could have on the campaign. And we also began to think about media strategy, digital, advertising buying, how could we do all of the -- you know, kind of the mechanics of a presidential campaign more efficiently, make our money go farther, reach people where they were, rather than just kind of the old model of throwing tons of money up on TV and kind of hoping, you know, hoping it worked.



Q: Well, one of the things that distinguished the Bush campaign both elections from his opponents was having a team of people who were really committed to George W. Bush and kept that commitment [00:10:00] through the second -- through the reelect, running against candidates who basically hired guns to run their campaigns. And I wonder, in 2000 and 2004, I mean was it the assumption that this is the group that is going to be running things between now and 2004, and during 2004; therefore, this team can start thinking about what's that going to be like.

SHANNON: You know, some of the main players, I think, knew that they would be involved again. And in particular, both Ken Mehlman and Matthew Dowd, who were two of the central leaders of our 2004 effort, I think had a sense from 2001 to 2004 that they were going to be the leaders of the effort. And so they began thinking very strategically. Of course, Ken went into the White House and ran political affairs, [00:11:00] and a lot of us went on the White House staff, and though we thought about 2004, that felt like a long time away. And I went on the White House staff, worked in the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives, and worked on coordinating public opinion research and message research to help shape the message around the president's priorities. I ended up leaving the White House -- of course, well, I mean, just pause and saying of course, and then 9/11 happened, and politicking in campaigns kind of fades, you know, from view. And I remember the day after 9/11, Karl told the staff, he said we worked so hard in the 2000 campaign for this moment in time. Politics is really going to recede now. But you can all be proud; you're going to be asked to do different things that [00:12:00] aren't in your day to day job responsibilities. Whether it's writing letters to people who've been affected by this, or helping coordinate events. But politics are going to recede for a time, but that's why we worked so hard in 2000. And I ended up, for about three or four months, just writing messages to people who'd been affected by 9/11. Some of the memorials, some of the heroes of 9/11, the non-military, non-first responder heroes. And then I ended up leaving to go to business school. And I -- when I left, I didn't have the 2004 campaign on my mind. I was kind of, had done my campaign, had been on the White House staff, was headed off to business school. And one of my mentors, who's since passed away, had told me that campaign, White House, and then if you want to go to the private sector, is a really good path. And he always said, you know, beware of second terms. [00:13:00] (laughter) So, I went off to business school and didn't have any intention of returning to the 2004 campaign. And then, I was doing an internship down in Mexico City for a management consulting firm, and got a call from Matthew Dowd saying he was going to be the chief strategist for the campaign, and --

Q: When was this?



SHANNON: This was in the summer of 2003. And he said, "I'd like you to come be one of my deputies and be a strategist on the team and run the media buying." I said, "Well, that's great, but I'm in the middle of business school." And he said, "I know." And I said, "Well, when do you need me, because I'm about to start my second year." And he said, "Well, I'd need you at the latest on January 1, 2004, for the full year of the campaign." So I thought about it for a day or two, and came to the conclusion that you're not going to get a lot of calls like that. I might not ever get a call like that again. [00:14:00] And so, called him back and said, "I'll be there January 1," and I went back -- I was in business school at the Kellogg School at Northwestern, and went back for the fall, and didn't quite have the motivation that I'd had the first year, because I knew I was going to be heading off to a presidential campaign. And in December of that year, packed up with my fiancée, and we drove to Washington, DC, and I jumped on the campaign just like we talked about January 1.

Q: That was, I guess roughly about the time when the conventional wisdom had become Bush is going to be running against Howard Dean. And I'm thinking about something you said earlier; my guess is you were the youngest person on the 2000 campaign, and therefore kind of got some things about the kind of web-based and other electronic communication. [00:15:00] You seem to be the guy who figured all that out, or at least in his campaign who figured all that out. Did you think that running against Dean was going to -- did that -- that Bush was going to be running against Dean, and if so, would that have been a -- presented a particular challenge?

SHANNON: We -- like everybody, we thought Governor Dean was the leading contender, that we were planning for all contingencies, and saw John Kerry, and John Edwards, and Richard Gephardt as all viable players. I think, you know, Howard Dean's campaign was an insurgency, and I think we've seen over time, whether it's the Left or the Right, insurgencies thrive online, and that was one -- probably the first moment where we saw the power of the internet at fueling an insurgency, an insurgent candidate that nobody [00:16:00] really knew about, nobody thought was a contender, and then all of a sudden they're leading a race. And we've seen what President Obama did with his online campaign, but we've seen it with the Tea Parties, and I think probably the first candidate to do that was Jesse Ventura in the late '90s, at the advent of the internet. We didn't -- we weren't --

Q: Running for governor of Minnesota?

SHANNON: That's right.

Q: And winning.

SHANNON: That's right. Running for governor of Minnesota, real early in the life of the internet, using it as an online organizing tool. So, we were certainly -- I mean we were watching Governor Dean, watching that insurgency, preparing for that possibility. We had planned for 2004, from a digital perspective, to evolve



dramatically from 2000. Of course, technology had changed dramatically since then in a lot of ways, from [00:17:00] an internet perspective, it's I think important to remember, there -- at that time, there was no Facebook, or if there were Facebook, I guess it started in 2004, it was still an early idea at Harvard. There was no Twitter, there was no iPhones, no app stores, so it was kind of an in between moment. Online video was coming to the forefront. Email marketing had changed dramatically. And just people's use of computers had changed dramatically since 2000. So as we -- you know, as we -- I think we were planning for Dean, of course, until his scream. And it became clear that Senator Kerry was going to be the likely nominee, but we had -- you know, we had oppo research books and play books this thick for all the possible opposition, and that's [00:18:00] -- it's one of the luxuries of being an incumbent. Not only all this planning we're talking about, and we will talk about, that was done in advance of the 2004 race, but you have time to kind of sit back, watch the other side fight it out, and as they're doing that, they kind of beat each other up, and also you're able to kind of start building your strategy and your case so that when that nominee is named, you're ready to come out of the gates fast, which we did.

Q: You mentioned the pre-election year planning. Other than knowing you were going to be using digital media a lot more, and what you just mentioned, what -- you came back into the campaign on the first of January. What was the state of that campaign in terms of developing a strategy for the coming year?

SHANNON: There had been a lot of groundwork done in the previous 18 months. And in particular, [00:19:00] on the strategy side, two political innovations were progressing along, and would come to full fruition later that year. One of them was micro-targeting. Over the previous year or two, we had done some experiments where we would essentially take the voter file, append a bunch of consumer data bought from third-party vendors like Axiom, where they gather things about magazine subscriptions, and number of kids, and other demographics, and consumer habits, purchasing data from credit cards. We had appended it to the voter file, so we'd have people's names and addresses, and voting history, and then we'd have all this consumer data, and then we'd take a large sample poll, 4 or 5,000 people in each state. And the theory behind micro-targeting is that we could predict [00:20:00] with higher accuracy whether somebody was a Republican or Democrat or swing voter. And also, get a sense of what kind of Republican or Democrat or swing voter they were, so we could better target the message on a micro level, hence micro-targeting, to those people. And so, a lot of work had been done on that by the time I arrived, and we were considering whether we wanted to invest a lot of money in that effort, which we ended up doing. And that was a big innovation; of course that feels like it should be in a museum now with everything that has happened since then, from a big data and targeting perspective. But at the time was a big leap in how we



identified and targeted voters. It -- I think there's some mythology around micro-targeting, that it -- somehow, I could send you just the right message, [00:21:00] and that message would motivate you on Election Day to go to the polls, because you're -- you were a flagging family Republican, and you got a piece of mail, and that helped us win the election. I think ultimately, that kind of micro-targeting message in a big presidential context, has limited power. There's so many other things, so many other pieces of information that people are receiving about a presidential campaign, in the earned media, the free media. I think where it came -- where it was very powerful in our campaign is that from our targeting for get out the vote efforts, where we would send door knockers and phone calls, and mail to get people out to vote. Instead of doing it on a precinct basis, where we'd say well, we're going to go to this precinct, because it's heavily Republican, so we're going to focus our get out the votes efforts there, but these Democratic precincts, we're not going to go there because we know if we knock on doors, there's a good chance it'll be a Democrat, and that'll be counterproductive. We don't want to remind Democrats [00:22:00] that they need to vote. With micro-targeting, we were able to go into precincts, into places we wouldn't have normally gone, to call numbers we wouldn't have normally called, and to ask them to vote. Deliver a message that may be better tailored for them, but I think the power of micro-targeting was less in targeting the message, and just knowing which voters we wanted to get out. And part of the theory of the 2004 election that our strategy team has, this was a mobilization election, be highly partisan, kind of who can get their base out, that the middle for this election was small, swing voters in aggregate were smaller than in previous years. Partly because it was a reelection, and there were very strong opinions about the president, partly because of the dynamics of the American electorate had been changing over time. And so, micro-targeting was a very [00:23:00] important political innovation that had been worked on for quite a while. And then we made the big investment in it. The other thing that was really a quantum leap in how we spend our money on TV, had to do with our advertising targeting. Separate from micro-targeting, around 2002, one of the chief researchers at our main ad agency was in a meeting with the president of a data company called Scarborough Research. And as they were talking, and talking about the types of information that Scarborough Research collected on TV viewers, Will Feltus, who works at National Media, stumbled across a couple of questions that were being asked of all these TV viewers. One of them was, "Are you registered to vote?" A second was, "Are you a Democrat or Republican?" And [00:24:00] the third was, "How often do you vote in elections?" And he said, "Are these available, these questions, to cross against people's TV habits?" And they said, "Yes." And that was kind of a light bulb moment, really kind of a seminal moment in political advertising buying. What we were able to do, working with National Media, using Scarborough data,



is for each market we bought an ad in, we were able to buy shows that indexed high, meaning Republicans were much more likely to watch that show than another show. Indexed high Republican, or indexed high Republicans and swing voters. In a presidential election, you don't want to send -- buy a lot of TV ads for Democrats; that usually is wasted advertising, or even counterproductive advertising, because it causes them to turn out. So, that was kind of a -- that was an extraordinary find [00:25:00] by Will and National Media, and because of that, we were able to buy our television advertising much different than we had in 2000, and than any campaign had ever done in the past. In the past, you relied upon Nielsen data, Nielsen data and Scarborough data, but most people are familiar with the Nielsen ratings. Nielsen data you'd buy on things like age and sex. So you'd buy -- might buy, you know, men 18 to 49, the traditional political buyer might buy adults, 35-plus. We went from doing that to let's buy Republican shows, and Republican and swing voter shows.

Q: So for example?

SHANNON: So, well, I will say what we found is that shows like, that you would guess would be Republican were Republican. Things like *CSI*, [00:26:00] and *NCIS*, shows like that index very high Republican. Probably more important, or just as important as finding out which shows indexed high Republican, is we found out that Republicans generally watch a lot less TV than Democrats. We called it the "grip gap." So Gross Rating Points is that -- if you buy -- if you just went out and bought some TV, you were likely to have your ads seen by more Democrats than Republicans. And so, what we were able to then find out is well, we know Republicans watch TV, but we needed to find out when they watch TV in larger numbers than Democrats. What we found out is that was usually on weekends, and often in prime time or late at night, and so in the ad buying industry, those are called day parts. So we were able to shift our ads into different time slots that were more Republican, and we also found out that Republicans watched a lot less traditional broadcast TV, [00:27:00] like NBC or ABC or CBS. They watched cable -- certain cable networks in high numbers. And so we found out we should be advertising on the Country Music Channel, we should be advertising on the History Channel, Republicans watch a lot of live sports, so we reoriented our entire buying strategy to make sure that it was efficient, and those dollars went much further than in the year 2000. I will say that the advertising landscape in 2004 was dramatically different than 2000. In 2000, there were four main advertisers. There was the Bush campaign, the Gore campaign, the DNC, and the RNC, the two national committees. By 2004, with the way money was working in politics, campaign finance reform, political innovation, a lot of third-party groups emerged. This was really [00:28:00] the beginning of where we are now, you know, 10 years later, of third-party groups exerting their influence on elections through advertising. And it was --



Q: Third-party meaning?

SHANNON: Third-party meaning MoveOn.org, there were several -- it was mainly on the Democratic side for most of the year, until we got to the fall. Early on, there were several large groups, liberal money, that went on the air, March, April, May, June, July, August. By August, two allied groups with our campaign that wanted the president to win came on that proved critical in the broader debate. Most people know about Swift Boat Veterans for Truth; that came on I think in August. And then I think it was called Progress America came on that fall and spent a lot of money in [00:29:00] September and October. Our campaign itself, in coordination with the RNC, I think we allocated -- well, I think we spent about \$230, \$240 million on advertising for the full year, which was a big spend, much bigger than we'd spent in the year 2000. All that being said, we were outspent most of the months until we got to October, when you added up the outside spending. So that was new, and one other thing that was new about advertising is -- and this gets to the technological change over four years, is that you could make ads much faster. You could transmit ads much faster. So the tools of the trade had begun to change, much more accessible to people. We didn't have iPhones back there, so there weren't [00:30:00] trackers going around taking videos, but you could get in the edit studio, you could make an ad, and you could get it shipped to a station digitally; you didn't have to send a tape or a disc to a station in the mail. And that changed some of the speed of the campaign. As far as advertising went, we made a lot more ads in 2004 than we made in 2000. And probably the most important moment where we were able to make a quick ad and get that ad somewhere quickly presented itself early in the campaign with Senator Kerry going to West Virginia, it was -- we decided we were going to make an ad to talk about his voting against funding for the troops. We made the ad, and he did something that no candidate should ever do at any level, in any race anywhere, which [00:31:00] is he responded to an ad in a town hall. And he uttered his now famous phrase, "I did vote for it before I voted against it." And he was actually talking about our ad, the attack that had been leveled that morning, and those are -- you know, ad makers dream about those kinds of moments. There's not many of those, and so we had an ad that caused a response, that then turned into a second ad, which was then -- we took his town hall statement and put it in the ad. And at that moment, it had changed from an ad to a gigantic story. And that was, I think, it was a moment where we felt like we had proven a theory that we had going into the campaign, which was that our advertising should largely be geared towards affecting the broader conversation. That changing someone's opinion [00:32:00] while they're on the couch watching TV, watching *ER*, and a commercial flashes across the screen, there's so much other information that affects voters that they get tired, they get worn out, that their decision making process is much more complex than "I just saw that ad," that what we really wanted to do with our



creative pieces was to affect the broader debate in the campaign, and to create moments in time that mattered. And I think that was a big moment in that campaign. It cemented the charge that we were making against Senator Kerry, that he flip-flopped, and he kind of fell into that trap.

Q: Yeah, you mentioned the rise of the third-party or independent actors running ads, and so on. Strategically, you have a plan for winning the election, and that plan involves communicating certain messages, and then there are these other people out there communicating messages. [00:33:00] Did you see their activities, the ones on your side, as contributing to the Bush reelection, or impeding in some way what you were hoping to accomplish, the messages you were hoping to send?

SHANNON: Oh, you mean the allied groups that were running third-party ads?

Q: Yes, yes.

SHANNON: Yeah, it was a strange phenomenon, in 2000 you kind of -- there was an ad placed, it was kind of like the Bush campaign placed their ads on Mondays, and the DNC placed it on Tuesdays, and the RNC placed it on Wednesdays, and Al Gore placed his on Thursdays. And then another week would start. That's just kind of how -- there was a rhythm, weekly buys, here are the ads -- 2004 began this era of the Wild West, with all these third-party advertisers, where at any moment, we might get an email from CMAG, which is a service that tracks political advertising, saying that MoveOn.org just went up with a new spot, or the Media Group just went up with a new spot, or the labor unions just went up with a new spot. Or when we got to [00:34:00] August and September and October, Progress for America just went up with a spot, or the Swift Boats went up for -- you know, with a spot. Our third parties didn't come in until towards the end of the campaign. So most of the early part of the campaign, we were trying to figure out how much we needed to match the spend of those third parties in different media markets. Were those attacks having any -- you know, gaining any traction? Were they hurting in the polls at all? By the time we got to the fall and those kind of pro-Bush third parties emerged, it was actually nice to know that the other side was going to now have to be dealing with some anti-Kerry third-party advertising. Because it -- you know, it certainly throws you off-balance. I think from a spend perspective, [00:35:00] the pro-Kerry third-party groups didn't -- I don't think they affected the race much. And I think -- because ultimately, it's about the power of the ad, and the message, it's not about how much money they were spending. And of course, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, they made an ad that echoed throughout the presidential campaign. And to the extent that campaigns are about moments, that was one of those moments in the campaign where everybody in the country kind of paused and looked and listened, and made some judgments. Progress for America also made a really beautiful spot towards the end that was one of the most recalled ads of the presidential election, it showed the president hugging a



young girl who had lost a family member in 9/11, a very emotional moment, and it's hard to break through with a positive ad in a presidential campaign, but a very powerful ad. So, [00:36:00] those -- our third parties made some spots that had impact, regardless of how much they spent. I think the other side's third parties, their investment didn't have a very big return.

Q: I know that legally, a campaign can't consult with third parties --

SHANNON: That's right.

Q: -- you can't coordinate, but is there any sort of signaling going on? You know, we're talking about this, so guys, you know, if you want to talk about that, we're going positive, so guys, if you want to go -- any of that going on?

SHANNON: Yeah. I stayed as far away from that as I possibly could. It was early on in this era of third-party advertising, and I had long discussions with our general counsel about that very topic, Tom Josefiak, and it was one of those things where you have an instinct, [00:37:00] you want to. I remember, I was at a party, I saw somebody I knew was working for a third-party, and I just turned and walked the other way, because I didn't even want to be seen talking to them. Now all that being said, we monitored all their buys extraordinarily closely. And one of the debates inside the campaign was, should we be looking at our spending versus Kerry's spending, or should we be looking at our spending and our allies' spending versus Kerry's spending and his allies' spending? And I think ultimately you have to add everybody's efforts up, kind of all at once. But it's also very hard to track in the heat of a presidential campaign all those different ads. That was one of the great challenges of 2004, you're tracking all the ads, you're not sure how much they're running, because campaigns that are third-party expenditure campaigns pay a lot of money for ads, much more than presidential candidates. So we might get some market intelligence say [00:38:00] they spent this much, but we weren't sure how much it bought them.

Q: The reason for that is they get a less favorable rate?

SHANNON: They get a less favorable rate; they're often buying at the last second. So those two things combined, it just -- there was a little bit of a fog that year as far as what these third party groups kind of spending meant. But we didn't see a lot of impact, you know, in the polls. We made a decision early on that we were going to space our advertising out, where we had two or three really focused bursts of advertising. Strategic windows in the campaign where we felt like let's -- we're always going to have some minimum level, but we're going to have a spike and a surge, and then we'll kind of get back to a minimum level, and spike, and surge, because we have limited resources. And one of those windows was right out of the gate in that March timeframe when John Kerry became the nominee. We spent a lot of money. If you look at a chart of our [00:39:00] spending, it just went like this, then we kind of tapered off in April, then it really dropped down over the summer. And we were outspent when you include those third parties, all summer



long. And then when we got to the convention, which was end of August, beginning of September, in New York, then we said it's time again to kind of make that burst. We kind of, we'd saved up some resources for that sprint to the finish line.

Q: Was that early burst, the one in March and April, was that because although Kerry had won the nomination, his identity hadn't yet been established in the minds of voters --

SHANNON: That's right, that's right.

Q: -- and you wanted to do that before he did?

SHANNON: That's right. He's new to the national stage, and it's a moment for him to define himself, for us to define him. At that point in time, when you're running for reelection, everybody knows who the president is and what he stands for. So the big question is, who's the alternative? And so, we were ready for that moment, [00:40:00] and we marshaled a lot of our resources financially for TV for that moment. And kind of came out of the gates swinging. But there's that -- that window closes after about 30 or 60 days where people who are making those initial impressions -- and it includes the media, because the media's making their initial impressions, and that's part of shaping creative advertising to impact the broader dialogue, is it's not just about voters, there's the gatekeepers of a presidential election, which are largely the media. And so, we wanted to make sure we came out strong during that 30 to 60 day window, when there was a debate on who is John Kerry. And I think we were very effective, and then we knew really the next big moment for the campaign that we could control was going to be the convention. But a lot of things happened between then and the convention, and we took on a lot of water, Abu Ghraib happened, there were some, [00:41:00] you know, pretty dark moments, kind of early summer, fell behind a little bit. But the campaign, there seemed to be a natural kind of two to three point advantage, with some dips here and there, or some spikes. We seemed to have it most of the time. I do want to mention something about technology, changes in campaigns over the years, and in particular between 2000 and 2004, is the advent of the BlackBerry. This hasn't been talked a lot about in political circles, at least, you know, in journalism, but what happened between 2000 and 2004 was pretty remarkable from a day to day life of campaign staff member, day to day life of a journalist. In the year 2000, when I left the campaign, [00:42:00] it may have been eleven o'clock at night, it may have been one o'clock in the morning; when I went home, I went home. And I was largely uninterrupted. Sleep, see friends, talk to somebody. If someone on the campaign had a need, and needed to reach me, they needed to call me on my cell phone. Broadband penetration was very low then; it was just at its beginning. Very few people had campaign laptops. If they did, they had really slow dial-in. And so, there was some semblance of life outside of a campaign. When you're at the



campaign headquarters, you're on campaign time, and when you weren't, unless there was an emergency, people weren't going to call you in the middle of the night. By 2004, we'd entered the smartphone era, and in particular the BlackBerry era. So everybody had BlackBerrys on both campaigns, and all the journalists had BlackBerrys. And so, all -- that created this extraordinary velocity that we didn't have [00:43:00] in 2000, where reporters are emailing the candidates, emailing the campaign, emailing each other, constantly. Campaign staff is emailing each other constantly, CCing each other constantly. And I remember early on in the campaign, I went to bed one night, and it was like 1:00 in the morning and I woke up at 6:00, and I had like 100 emails. And that was a new phenomenon, because in the year 2000, you'd go maybe leave real late, and you get back in the morning, and maybe someone was there overnight sending a few emails, but your inbox was not that full. And you could wake up in the morning in 2004 and find out there's new ads that have been launched, because somebody shipped something overnight, and new stories were breaking, and there's chains of emails happening. So it was a much more grinding campaign. And of course, that's only intensified the last two [00:44:00] presidential campaigns, 2008, 2012, with the advent of social media. But it is -- it's hard to imagine presidential campaigns without smartphones. And 2004 was really the first campaign. It was the modern campaign, it was the smartphone campaign. Really changed things.

Q: You said earlier that one of the things you took out of the 2000 election was the importance of sort of the big events that you know are going to happen, and the country's going to be paying attention to. Can we turn to the conventions in '04? How well did you think the Democrats did? What did you hope to accomplish at the Republican convention? And do you think you succeeded?

SHANNON: I think the Democrats had a very poor convention. They -- and when I say that, I think it's -- most conventions come down to the night [00:45:00] of the big acceptance speech by the presidential nominee, Thursday night. Wednesday night's usually the VP. They ran a mechanically good convention, but from a message to the country, I think it was a big failure, and left us a big opening. And I say that because, this was I think kind of a reflection of John Kerry's broader strategy, John Kerry's case to the American people was largely based on biography. It was a very tough year with the war in Iraq going south, and I think John Kerry saw an opening from a message perspective to, as he did, report for duty. And he based his campaign on his experience as a veteran, and as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Somebody who knew foreign policy at a time when we were in a really tough war and a tough place globally. And really built [00:46:00] his campaign around that, and it really crystallized when he did -- when he stepped to the lectern and said, "Reporting for duty." And that's what most people remember from that convention, is he reported for duty, and that he was a veteran, and he was a foreign policy expert.



He -- I think because he was so focused on biography, he and his team did not spend enough time focused on an agenda. No one really knew what his agenda was after that convention. And I think that's a trap for challengers. We've seen that in a few other presidential campaigns, where the challenger spends so much time focused on the incumbent, he doesn't sell his vision and his agenda. And I think John Kerry got caught in that trap, especially -- and I think that happens when your biography feels like it kind of fits the moment in time. So there's a lot of emphasis on biography, [00:47:00] so they got a small bump out of that convention, but I don't think they set up the campaign the way they wanted to. And so, we were able to go to New York and talk about the next -- the agenda for the next four years. We actually spent a lot of time talking about an agenda, which can be hard for an incumbent, because you've already done a lot, and you've got to talk about the promises made, and promises kept. But we spent a lot of time talking about an agenda for America; we also had a great lineup of speakers that showed a diversity across the Republican Party. And of course, being in New York, all the symbolism post-9/11 and Mayor Giuliani, and Arnold Schwarzenegger came and spoke, and we had a beautiful video called "The Pitch" about the president's pitch at the Yankees playoff game, in the aftermath of 9/11. Very, very well done convention, and gave us a real head of steam coming out [00:48:00] of New York. And we also -- I think the later you can have your conventions, the better. To the extent that conventions are a moment in time where you can get some momentum and focus the American public, I think our -- if you can have the second convention like we had in 2004, going second helps. They had their chance, then we had our chance, and then we had the momentum coming out of that convention, and we had that momentum just I guess all the way until Miami, the first debate.

Q: Let's pause there for a second, because one of the things that both campaigns decided to do for the fall was to take the federal money, just to take the 75 million, as opposed to going out and raising money on their own. And the Kerry people will say that really hurt us, because we had a three month campaign after our election -- after our convention, [00:49:00] and the Bush people had a two month campaign, we both had the same amount of money to spend, but they were able to spend it in a more concentrated way. Why didn't -- I guess a question I'm pointing to here is why not say Uncle Sam, keep your 75 million and raise as much money as you can? Run -- do everything you want to do in a campaign, instead of having to make (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

SHANNON: You know, I wasn't privy to all those discussions. I think you're right that we had like a 10 week sprint. So one of the -- I mean, one of the factors of the decision making process was how much money can we spend on TV, which is the lion's share of a budget in a presidential campaign, in 10 weeks? And how much money do we actually need to spend on TV? And are there other pots of money that we



can draw upon to be spent on TV? And one of the things we did that fall, we were able to run joint advertising with the Republican National Committee, [00:50:00] where we were able to, in a sense, make the case for President Bush and the Congressional Republicans, as long as those two words were in the advertisement together, we were able to draw upon some Republican National Committee money. So we were able to enlarge that 75 million kind of beyond it. And that's something that the Kerry team saw us do, and then they realized they could do it, and then they began doing it. But we did it for a few weeks, and when you're only in a 10 week fall campaign, they've lost a couple weeks. So, they had a longer time period, and then they didn't have the DNC money match like we had the RNC money. We certainly had enough money. I think there's -- there's only so much -- the diminishing marginal returns are significant when you get up to the amount of TV advertising we were buying. At some point, it can almost be counterproductive. [00:51:00] So -- and I think you have to maintain a big fundraising operation. You have to have your candidate go and raise money. Funders like to see the candidate. And so, there are some strategic decisions in that small window about do we need to have our whole fundraising operation up, and dedicate all that time and energy, including possibly some of the candidate's, to pursuing those dollars. I think that may, you know, be the last time that candidates do that. I know things have changed a lot with kind of raising money.

Q: Well, we will come back to the debates, which is what you were on the cusp of. And I wanted to ask you this, after the election, there were news stories that quoted President Bush as having told Ken Mehlman and Karl, I'm not sure who, "Don't give me a lonely victory. I don't want to win by an unnecessarily big margin when we could be taking some of our resources and helping Republicans get elected to Congress." Was that [00:52:00] part of the strategy, or was that a kind of ex post facto (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

SHANNON: I did not have any visibility into that, and it didn't affect, as far as I know, any of our day to day work. Especially on the advertising, you know, placement side. That's where we spent the lion's share of the campaign, and in fact, I mean we had a -- money shows up at the end of presidential campaigns. And I remember we were wrestling at the end, should we spend more money? I mean we -- it's like, because you're running a business that's going to essentially cease to exist. And so you're having to be a good steward of that money over time, and you have a certain run rate of expenses, and you have a certain run rate of money coming in, and towards the end, usually if it's a well run campaign, and Ken ran an extraordinary campaign, money starts kind of showing up right at the last day. "Can you spend any more money in Ohio?" I remember that was one of the last questions on the last day. And I said no. [00:53:00] You know, there's no more money to be spent, let's just pay the staff through the end of November.



Q: The debates. That's another event that is so institutionalized now, the candidates, campaigns, voters know after the conventions that these are coming. And yet, President Bush's performance, at least in the first debate, was a kind of disappointing one. How did that happen, and do you feel like you recovered from it in the subsequent debates?

SHANNON: Well, we certainly recovered from it. How it happened, I think that's probably a question for the president. Because I think he knows best whether he felt like it was an off night, or if he felt like he didn't prepare well enough. He seemed low energy, and he seemed like he, you know, wanted to be somewhere else. And I think that's part of [00:54:00] being an incumbent facing a challenger who's not the president. And we saw this in the most recent presidential election with President Obama, that first debate. And there's a history of that in kind of first debates with incumbents. I think part of it is, for the first time, you see the two men on the same stage together, kind of in a one on one exchange, where there's kind of the great equalizer. And so I think it's already a steep hill to climb for the incumbent, just by showing up, the challenger gains some credibility. But yeah, I call it the hot night in Miami. It was definitely a moment in time in the campaign where you felt a little air coming out of the balloon. And we had kind of a -- we established a nice kind of four or five, six point lead coming out of the convention, maybe settling in around four. But we gave some of that [00:55:00] early work, you know, kind of gave it back that night. But the president did very well the next two debates, and really stabilized the campaign dynamics, and we always thought it would be a two to three point race. And of course, by the end, it was a 2.7, 2.8 race. And things kind of settled back into that natural dynamic.

Q: The turnout in '04 was dramatically higher than in 2000. Which brings to mind what you said earlier about this being a mobilization election. Could you talk about that? I mean, did the turnout conform to what you had been working toward, and expected to happen?

SHANNON: It -- I think the extraordinary thing about the 2004 election for us, having a theory of the campaign that it was a mobilization election, was that it did bear out. And that we -- when you look at the exit polls from [00:56:00] 2004, it was the first time in modern presidential history that the Republican Party had turned out in equal numbers to the Democratic Party. That is, people who said "I am a Republican" in the exit poll, that was equal, I think it was 38/38, somewhere in the thirties. We had equal number of Republicans and Democrats voting, so we were very pleased by that number, and that really carried us to victory, was to get that number up. So, a lot of our activities, certainly advertising, field work, the micro-targeting, all the political innovation, you know, that had happened, was marshaled to try to turn out the base.

Q: You have to talk -- I'm sorry.



SHANNON: Yeah, yeah. I was going to say, and we also, we had a really -- we had a great digital team. I don't think the 2004 [00:57:00] team, the 2004 effort gets enough credit for what we did digitally. We had an all-star group of people, Chuck DeFeo, who's gone on and done many things, and is now trying to lead the renaissance at the RNC, and digital's going to come back on the team 10 years later. Michael Turk, Patrick Ruffini, Mindy Finn, who went onto Twitter. Justin German, he's one of the top videographers, we had -- we didn't know it at the time, but the amount of talent we had on the digital team was extraordinary. And we -- they ran an extraordinary operation. We used a web video, we released ads as web videos, that was the first time any candidate had done that. And we had a very sophisticated online team leader program where we engaged a lot of our grassroots, a lot of our base [00:58:00] in taking actions for us. Yard signs, going to events, door knocking, kind of very early version of what then accelerated dramatically with the Obama team in 2008, and then onto 2012. We didn't have the social tools to put underneath that. But our digital effort, we had a massive email list we'd built over the years. All of that was part of the successful mobilization.

Q: What we haven't talked about so far are the groups of non-traditional, non-Republicans who voted for Bush in unusual numbers. I'm thinking Latinos, I think women voters to some degree, where going from 48% to 51% was in part mobilizing voters at a higher rate than the Democrats, although they did well. But also, getting votes from non-traditional [00:59:00] groups. Was that a separate kind of strategic prong?

SHANNON: Well, the -- I think it's -- if we can call it strategy, we can also just say it's, you know, who the president was and is. Since his days of governor -- as governor, he was someone who reached out to non-traditional Republican groups, to non-Republican groups. Of course in 2000, he talked about being a different kind of Republican. He, I think being a governor of a border state, understood the immigration issue very well, and had an immigration reform policy that resonated in the Latino community.

Q: Does that explain the jump from 2000 to 2004?

SHANNON: Well I think there's jumps that occur because the country kind of moves. So there's some that's just a natural [01:00:00] evolution of -- or kind of a natural momentum among all groups. So, if -- you know, if the president gets -- you know, performs three to four points better nationally, then we would expect to see those groups to rise -- every group to rise three or four points. And then there's groups that kind of move beyond that. We definitely -- we spend a lot of time on our Spanish language advertising. There was a whole strategy around that, from a media buying perspective, from an outreach perspective, though I will say one of the things we decided was to spend a lot of time on Spanish language advertising, but not do too much custom Spanish language advertising. What we



learned is that Hispanic voters, at least in 2004, a lot of them, they wanted to hear about the same things everybody else [01:01:00] was hearing. They didn't necessarily want to be treated like some special group. And so, we wanted to be culturally attuned from a language perspective, from an are we in the right places perspective. And we did have some, you know, custom advertising. But we also just did a lot of our campaign advertising in Spanish language media.

Q: How much of a campaign is about winning on Election Day, and how much of it is about laying the predicate for what the president will have, using the term very loosely, a mandate to do if he's reelected?

SHANNON: Yeah. I think mandates are -- that's a big word. I think it's kind of like, it depends on what the definition of mandate is, in a way. There's winning, I think [01:02:00] in this polarized environment where it's almost -- virtually impossible to say when 60% of the country, what's a mandate in this polarized environment, is it winning 51, 53, 52? I mean President Bush was the first presidential candidate to win a majority since 1988, in 2004, just because of the dynamics of the other races. So in some sense, it -- there was a mandate feel. But in other senses, we'd won 51%. So, there's 49% who didn't vote for us. So, I think re-- I mean, I think reelections, to me, are about just getting to Election Day, and being president still. Because you're already president, you're doing things, and versus I think the challenger campaign is much more about setting, I think the agenda setting. President Bush, when he ran in 2000, a lot of what happened in 2000, a lot of the [01:03:00] themes, a lot of the policy papers, that then, when we got to Washington, with No Child Left Behind, the tax cuts, those were all from the laboratory of the campaign, and the campaign agenda. I think for incumbents, reelection, the agendas are less about the agenda that they're going to pursue, because they're already president.

Q: Even though the convention you said was designed to present the forward looking --

SHANNON: That's right.

Q: -- agenda.

SHANNON: That's right.

Q: Did that just not continue on through the post-convention campaign to the same degree?

SHANNON: I don't have -- I'll be talking as an outsider now, because after the 2004 campaign concluded, I went back to Chicago and retired into the warm arms of graduate school at Northwestern, and watched from afar, remembering my old mentor's advice, "Beware of second terms." I think [01:04:00] the president -- watching from afar, he and the team decided to pursue Social Security reform, and the country wasn't ready for it. That was a piece of that agenda. And of course in politics, sequencing matters, and so they went for Social Security reform, couldn't get it done, and I think that defeat really set the stage for other defeats, you



know, legislatively. So, I think maybe the mandate, maybe it was thought to be, you know, bigger than it was, in order to try to get something like Social Security reform passed, which is a massive undertaking.

Q: This is an unfairly big question to spring on anybody, but it sounds like, from what you've said, or what you've quoted someone as saying, that beware of second terms, that there's reason for that, [01:05:00] and that is the nature of the campaigns that lead to second terms. (inaudible)?

SHANNON: I think it's a whole host of factors. There is the accumulation of activities that a president undertakes over eight years. And in that accumulation, if you're running a country, there's -- when you get to your five, six, seven, eight, there's a chance that somebody who worked for you did something they shouldn't have. So, scandal chance is dramatically higher in the second term, just because of time. I think also that reelection campaigns are often really tough, and this one was tough, it was very negative, just -- we just had a negative one in 2012. So there's a little -- you know, but things aren't as [01:06:00] -- there's not the momentum, when you begin a second term, it's not like beginning a presidency. When you begin a presidency, there's the honeymoon period, and you're fresh, and you have a fresh agenda, and you have those first two years before the midterms where you're pursuing that agenda. Whereas in the second term, you're just still president. And you're coming out of -- we were coming out of a tough campaign, the country was very polarized. I think the other thing that happens to presidents is they -- a lot of their most trusted advisors leave, and so there's --

Q: Or go to graduate school?

SHANNON: Well, no, I wouldn't put myself in that category, but if you look at the -- you know, the most senior command of the Bush White House, of the Bush campaigns, this has happened with every president. They just kind of begin to cycle out. And so [01:07:00] a president loses over time some of his most trusted sounding boards. And also, some of the best talent is attracted early in an administration because it's such a dynamic time, even getting Cabinet secretaries, getting senior White House staff, it's much easier to attract day 1 of a presidency than day 500. And so, you've got scandal probability is much higher in a second term, you've got a lot of turnover on staff, country maybe getting a little tired, and you don't have that dynamic burst out of the gate with the honeymoon period.

Q: Last question Mike, and that -- what is it that you think people don't understand about George W. Bush that, based on your closer observation of him than most Americans, never get a chance to --

SHANNON: Well, he's extraordinarily thoughtful [01:08:00] and he is somebody that I think everybody knows cares a lot, but he is somebody who thinks a lot. And I think because of some of the focus on his communications, speeches, or flubs, that -- and because he's from Texas, and talks a little different than maybe some of the country, that some of that thoughtfulness kind of got lost in the shuffle. So, he --



yeah, he was a wonderful guy to work for. I'm proud to have worked for him, and presidential campaigns are extraordinary years of your life that I don't think I'll have too many more like that.

Q: Well, thank you, Mike Shannon.

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