

Dole Institute of Politic Post Election Conference

Session One: The Republican Nomination Contests

Panelist:

Geoff Earle	Kelly O'Donnell	Jonathan Earle,
Christian Ferry	Ed Rollins	Moderator
Chris Henick	Nate Silver	Joe Gaylord, Moderator
Beth Myers	Bill Lacy	
Adam Nagourney	Sarah Simmons	

Jonathan Earle:

Thanks Bill for that welcome. A lot of us here at the Dole Institute and I think a lot of you here in the audience have really been looking forward to this Post Election Conference, not just because it's going to be a great conference but because it means the election is actually over.

As with all of our programs at the Dole Institute I would appreciate it if you would take a second to turn off your pagers and cell phones. This is being taped so if you do have to leave the room for any reason, please make yourself unobtrusive and sneak out the back.

I am going to give some very brief introductions. There are nice detailed introductions of all of your esteemed panelist in the handouts you received upon walking in. Please hold your applause until the end, if you feel like clapping. We're going to have five to seven minutes for each of the campaigns to trace out their path to the nomination; their plan as they saw it, if all things went well, that was going to result in their candidate being the Republican nominee for President. Then, Joe Gaylord and I will be questioning the panelists, both the members of the media, the new media and the campaign alumni. Finally we're going to open it up to Q and A from you for the last fifteen or twenty minutes. I'll decide when that time is, and there is a microphone in the back of the room. There should be plenty of access to it. So if you have a question make your way back there, one of our students will be there, ask a question. Please make it a question. Make it brief, no filibustering as per usual. Then we're going to conclude this session with time for a little bit of a break before we start our 4:00 session.

Let me start with some brief introductions. My partner in crime here is Mr. Joe Gaylord. Joe has been a fabulous fellow here at the Dole Institute. Whenever you see former speaker Newt Gingrich, who after all has a PhD in African history. Whenever he sounds like he knows what he's talking about politically, it's usually Joe Gaylord that's helping him out. He helped the Republicans take over Congress in 1994 and has really helped us here at the Dole Institute this past fall.

To Joe's Left, Beth Myers was campaign manager for Governor Mitt Romney and also served as the Governor's Chief of staff from 2003 to 2006. Ed Rollins managed President Reagan's reelection campaign in 1984. This year he served as National Chairman and Chief Strategist for Mike Huckabee's Presidential campaign. Bill Lacy you all know. He's been director of the Dole Institute since 2004. He took a leave of absence

to manage Fred Thompson's campaign. To his left, Kelly O'Donnell is the Capital Hill Correspondent for NBC News. This election cycle she covered the Republican Presidential hopefuls. Nate Silver is to her left, Managing Partner of Baseball Prospectus, but he's really here because he is creator of the website 538.com. Political junkies in the room are very familiar with Nate's website. Geoff Earle comes from a distinguished political family, more to the point he has covered politics in Washington for the last decade and a half, most recently for the *New York Post*. Adam Nagourney has been the chief political correspondent for the *New York Times* since 2002. His first assignment for that paper was covering the Presidential campaign of Senator Robert Dole. Chris Henick was Senior Advisor to the Rudy Giuliani Campaign and has held several important posts inside the Republican Party. Sarah Simmons was Deputy Director of Campaign Strategy for John McCain's Presidential Campaign. To her left, Christian Ferry was the Deputy Campaign Manager for McCain-Palin 2008.

And with that I think I would like to start with Ms. Myers, talking a little bit about how she and Governor Romney planned to become the Republican Nominee for President.

Governor Romney's Campaign

Beth Myers:

Thank you very much Jonathan and Joe for having us here today. We had a very clear strategy, the only problem was it didn't work entirely as we planned it. Our strategy was what we called the early states strategy. If you all recall two years ago there was a lot of question about whether the Super Tuesday primaries would make the early states as relevant as they had been in past elections. We decided that we thought they were. So, our focus was on Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, Michigan, South Carolina and Florida. And we wanted to win early and we wanted to win often.

We sat down and looked at what we considered our strengths and our weaknesses. Our strengths were that we had a smart, articulate candidate who was very telegenic and did very well on TV. He was willing to work incredibly hard. We knew he could probably outwork anyone else in the field. He routinely worked 12, 14 hour days and he had a family that was committed to going on the road too. We had great fundraising networks. We had relationships in both New Hampshire and Michigan that went very long and very deep and Mitt had the ability to put in his own money. Therefore we made a decision to push very hard to become a major player and be considered on the same footing as the two icons in the race at that point, Mayor Giuliani and Senator McCain, who both had nearly 100 percent name recognition and were considered formidable opponents and were neck and neck for the lead in any national pole.

We thought our major weaknesses were that Governor Romney was what we called a triple M, a Mormon millionaire from Massachusetts. In the Republican Primary none of those things were good. We were very concerned even early on that there would be a potential strong candidate to the right. So we pushed hard. We had some great early successes, because Mitt was putting in his own money we recognized the importance of having very strong, early fundraising success because we didn't want to be looked at as a guy who was just going to self fund this thing; particularly Mitt did not want to have that impression out there.

So we had a fundraising goal. We started our campaign on January 2nd. January 5th we had a call day in Massachusetts where we raised \$6 million and we got four and a half million of that on credit cards. We brought all sorts of people in from around the country to raise money in Boston. So we jumpstarted our campaign with \$4.5 million in the bank the first week we went out there, which was incredibly helpful.

We went to the Straw Poll. We worked hard to win the Iowa Straw Poll. We thought that was important when Mitt needed to have an early victory. We also played hard in precinct caucuses in South Carolina and at minor skirmishes like CPAC and the Family Values Summit.

But, we did have a big concern, and that was that a candidate would emerge on the right, particularly in Iowa and as it turned out, we didn't know who that might be. I always thought that Governor Huckabee was the strongest contender, but it could have been Senator Brownback or Thompson. We were aggressive with Huckabee because we knew he posed a very serious threat to our candidacy.

The plan was to win in Iowa; the backup was New Hampshire and Michigan. We figured we needed to win one of those to stay viable going through to Nevada, South Carolina, which we really weren't playing that hard in, and then on to Florida. We won Michigan and went down to Florida where we were ultimately unsuccessful. We stayed in one more week through Super Tuesday but at that point we looked at it and we did not have a long-term strategy for winning. We graciously bowed out and gave our support to Senator McCain who we believed would be the nominee.

Governor Huckabee's Campaign

Ed Rollins:

It's a privilege to be here and especially to see my old friend Bill Lacy. Bill Lacy and I worked together in the White House. He was one of my three principle deputies. The other two are governors of states. We couldn't find a state for him. We couldn't find a state for Bill to get elected in. He lived in Maryland and we knew we couldn't elect him there so we put him out here in Kansas. Not going to happen. Keep your day job Bill.

I wasn't with Mike Huckabee in the beginning. It began as you described your campaign. We began with no money, no staff, no consultants. He basically, when he finished in January as governor, he sat down with some of his key people and said "I'm thinking about this." Did not have a penny. Did not have a fundraising base beyond Arkansas. Most of his major staff from the Governor's staff had gone out and gotten jobs and they weren't interested in going on a Presidential campaign. So it really began with his daughter, who is 25 years old, who is fabulous and became the national political director. Chip Saltzman, who's a great talent, had been planning the Senator's first Presidential campaign and I asked Huckabee one day, "where'd you find Chip?" He said, "Chip had a plan and no candidate and I had ambition and no campaign manager, so we came together."

The first time I joined in December I sat down with Chip to go over the strategy, so I will tell you what his strategy was. Win in Iowa, win in New Hampshire, win in South Carolina and then win Florida and then everyone else will quit. At that point we weren't going to Michigan. We were conceding that to Romney. And I said to him, "what happens if that scenario doesn't come forth," and he says, "don't know, that's our game

plan.” And we did very well on the first part of that in Iowa which was really grass roots when you realize the amount of money Huckabee had. I think he spent \$600,000 total in Iowa, which is like a congressional race. Mike had a very extraordinary ability to communicate and what we basically did without much television is put him on the free television. Between December 1st and January 15th he did over 350 interviews. To a certain extent he had a very clear message. He was very articulate. Obviously Iowa was a grassroots effort. There were lots of natural constituencies there, going from six, eight, ten people to big crowds in the end. I think to a certain extent it was one of these that happens historically where a campaign catches momentum and when the momentum catches up to its lack of organization it gets done in.

When I got on there I basically tried to put the pieces in place to bet beyond Iowa and, once again, we didn’t have a fundraising base. We did most of our fundraising on the Internet. It started coming in when we won Iowa, but we could never get ahead of it. We obviously didn’t have the staff to do policy papers and what have you, but Mike Huckabee has a great ability get on his computer every morning and do his own thing and he has a great ability to speak words that came off as great speeches that actually were from the top of his head. He was as talented a candidate as I’ve ever seen. He’s as lovely a person as I’ve ever seen.

But there were fun days. Like I get a call from our two advance guys who’ve driven from Iowa to Texas and they’d been arrested on the border. They arrived about one o’clock and they called me and I said “what’s going on?” They said “well, we’re out here with a flashlight looking for a sight tomorrow.” And I say “well did you call ahead? Who arrested you?” And they said “immigration.” “Well they probably think you’re sneaking into the country.”

For me it was a great campaign because first of all it was a great candidate and a lot of great young people. This is what our party needs to be again. I think to a certain extent, part of Mike Huckabee’s great appeal is that he understood the Internet. He is very oriented that way. We had a lot of bloggers. One of my favorite stories of the campaign was we had a bloggers press conference. There were about fifty bloggers in the room and all around the back of the room were all the national press. This was getting close to Iowa day. We were taking no questions from them, only bloggers. Fifty bloggers in the room and five-hundred bloggers on the phone, I sat there and I watched that and I said, “you know, this is the future, this is clearly the future.”

We were able to put a little bit of a block on you [referring to Beth Myers and the Romney Campaign]. If you had won Iowa I think you would have been much more formidable in New Hampshire and I think it might have changed the whole dynamics. Our race was kind of like a NASCAR race, we kind of bumped into each other on the way and then cars went by the wayside. Fred Thompson obviously did us in, in South Carolina. He took enough of the vote away. I think the tactical mistake we made is that we shouldn’t have gone to Michigan. We had to go to New Hampshire, because obviously that was after we won Iowa. I think if we had another week or two like we used to in the old days, we were gaining fast. I’m not saying we would have won, but we certainly would have been more credible there.

We were so compressed in this whole drill that it was hard even if you had big resources and combined that with the winner take all in so many of these states that we might have had a better process for all of us if it would have gone on longer. The great

advantage that Barack Obama had at the end of the day is that they had run a long campaign; his team was continually getting better as it went along organizing everywhere. To a great extent it worked to their advantage. Our campaign was over when we didn't win Texas. We won some southern states on Super Tuesday but we knew we couldn't go beyond where we were. We had no money for television anywhere. No money in Florida. When we knew that McCain was going to get the significant votes to be the nominee we pulled out. There was a moment or two that Huckabee wanted to go on and take it to the convention, sort of the crusade side of it.

One of the real disadvantages that we had is that the Christian Coalition, which was sort of our natural base, didn't believe in us initially. Some were with other candidates; they just didn't think Huckabee could win. I think he made converts out of a lot of that. However, I found in the course of it, these gigantic mega churches that are out there today, there's a lot of this organization that goes on that's beyond the national spokespeople we're all so used to. There are pastors and there are thousands of people in the pews every Sunday that have their own independence, they're very much a part of our party. We have to cultivate them but we can't cultivate them by just simply going to the old national leaders and saying "come with us and this is the best candidate."

I think the other advantage that Mike had was that he is viewed by young people as cool. He could play his guitar. He had Chuck Norris, which is an extraordinary phenomena that I knew nothing about. When I heard Chuck Norris was coming, I said "gee that's great." I remembered Chuck Norris from his movies back when I was in the White House but all of a sudden there's this great kid cult out there and it's just amazing. At the University of South Carolina, about twenty football players coming running up and they say, "there he is, there he is." I thought they were running to Huckabee and I was trying to think, "why are they going to Huckabee," and it's Chuck Norris.

But I think that it was about the Internet, it is about those methods of communications. I've done this for 40 years and my first political mentor was a Democrat, Jess Ungrew, a legendary democrat in California and the speaker. He told me, the business is about this: when you run a campaign its about finding your voter, communicating with your voter and getting them to the polls. There's a lot of ways to do that today; still the same three principles. I think the democrats proved that they understood all the new game and they did it very very well and I don't think we're quite there yet. Although I think we had bits and pieces of it in each of these campaigns and I think to a certain extent it was an extraordinary phenomena to go through as a campaign. It was great fun. I love being around the young people who would say "Mr. Rollins what was it like in the old days?" And I would say "what do you mean by the old days?" And they would say "like before Blackberries and I would say "before Blackberries, I was there before cell phones." They would say "no cell phones? How did you do this?" I would say "you'd get off the plane, you'd go get some quarters, you'd find a pay phone, you'd call back." They were sort of like "wow."

Fred Thompson Campaign

Bill Lacy:

Thank you for the set up Ed. I'd like to take this opportunity today to announce my candidacy for governor of the state of Kansas. In all seriousness, when I went to the

Thompson campaign, it was five months before the Iowa caucuses began. There were essentially two pathways to victory. There was the pathway when I got there and there was the pathway we came up with after I realized the first one wasn't going to even come close to working.

The original pathway idea was that you cut a few videos, have Fred author a few Op-Ed pieces in key newspapers, you have him campaign a little bit around the country, give a few key speeches and he gets elected President. Everybody sitting around this table knows that's not how it works. There's something called sloggng through the trenches in Iowa and New Hampshire. Every candidate who's ever been elected, at least in a contemporary period, has had to do that. So we basically had to do a complete rebuild of the campaign from scratch.

Essentially, when I got there, there were some good personnel in place in key areas. The political operation under Randy Enright was excellent. The policy operation was first rate. The finance operation was very strong and very good, but the communications shop, everyone in the communications shop had never set foot in a political campaign. I don't mean a Presidential campaign. I mean a political campaign. There was no campaign plan, there was no polling, there was not strategy in place. The finance Chairman who had been recruited eventually resigned in the fall. The head of the major donors group that we had, who had been recruited early early in the process, was found out to be a cocaine dealer from the early 1980s. That's no joke by the way. And so in essence what I was doing from day one was triage. I was trying to figure out the two or three things we have to do today to keep this thing going and to keep it moving.

Now we did have a strategy that we thought would work, based on our polling and based on our knowledge of the Republican Party. Basically, number one was to make the case that Fred Thompson was the genuine conservative in the race. I think most people thought that Senator McCain and Mayor Giuliani had conservative tendencies but weren't conservatives. I think a lot of people thought that clearly Mike Huckabee was a conservative but he was going to have a natural ceiling that he could never pass. I think with Governor Romney our feeling was that even though he was running as a conservative, he had to do some tough things as governor of Massachusetts, which basically created flaws in his conservative credentials.

The second part, based on my experience with Fred in 94 and 96 in his senate races, was that he's an outstanding communicator. We thought that that would work dramatically in our favor. The final thing that was going well for us was that Fred seemed to poll well in the research we very quickly did after I assumed control of the campaign in August. He polled very well among southern voters, mountain state voters and non-industrial Midwest voters and it was our goal to make a strong enough showing in Iowa. We knew we could never win Iowa because of the level of retail campaigning that it takes to do that and frankly the lack of time we had. Our strategy was to make a strong enough showing in Iowa to give us a legitimate reason to continue on into South Carolina and ultimately win in South Carolina and use that as a springboard to success.

Obviously the campaign failed and I think it failed for two principle reasons. Number one, we simply did not have enough time to build the infrastructure and to put together a strong strategy. And number two, there's another factor there that we had not faced in the 94 and 96 races and that was the Arthur Branch factor. And by that I mean in 1994 Fred had run or had never run for office. He had done bit parts on TV and movies

but he wasn't identified as a Character; he had no persona. So the person we put out on the stump did not conflict with a persona people already had in their minds. I believe the fact that the persona we put out there was different from the persona he presented on *Law and Order* actually cut against us.

It was a great opportunity for me. It's great to be back here at the Dole Institute and be able to organize events like this but it was really like Ed said, and I hate to say this Ed, but I'm an old guy too now and it was amazing, you know, people would say "faxes?" and kids would say "what did you use faxes for?" I had a Blackberry that Susie can tell you would just sit there all night long and just buzz at you and you just wanted to throw it away. So it was a great experience but it's great to be back here. It was a tough six months, I'll tell you that.

Mayor Giuliani's Campaign

Chris Henick:

I can state from the outset that being the GOP national frontrunner was not illusionary. I think what really proved that was when Charley Cook, of the Cook Political Report, probably in late April, was seriously considering his earlier statement that he would win the Tour de France before Rudy Giuliani would win the Republican nomination. One of the things we lost by not winning the nomination, I would have loved to see Charley Cook at the Minneapolis convention wearing that yellow spandex shirt. I think I'd get a kick out of that.

The frontrunnership was fascinating. I know because both John McCain and Mitt Romney had planned on running for President long before Rudy Giuliani thought about it. I'm certain with the organization you had, with PACs and the way you'd gone to help candidates. Those two were the candidates. We found ourselves right after the '06 election with roughly 53 percent of all Republicans in a Washington Post survey. What was more impressive was we were leading among likely Republican voters, but we were also leading among first and second choice likely Republicans. What was even more interesting was we were leading first and second choice combined self identified conservatives. So it was less a sense of geography. There's a lot of history in this campaign but what was most fascinating was that undisciplined primary calendar that all of us faced. I don't think I've ever been on a campaign that we didn't even know what the Election Day was in many states.

So our campaign's path to victory; first we knew there were 107 delegates in the first three states, in the Iowa caucus and the two primary states of South Carolina and New Hampshire before that. But what was more fascinating was the message, what Bill talked about, what their challenge was. The challenge was to define where the themes were. If you looked at those observations we clearly had to manage the reputation as the frontrunner, not only for us. We also had the advantage of Hillary Clinton at the time being the Democratic frontrunner. That juxtaposition actually helped us when we finally had to become the frontrunner. We had no choice because of the polling.

We also had to fill in the gap of likeability and of being the fiscal conservative. The mayor had cut taxes twenty-three times as mayor and worked for Ronald Reagan at the Justice Department so he could clearly claim the Ronald Reagan mantle, a non-Washington and leader. So we looked back at the attributes and what needed to be

accomplished, this is where Rick Davis misunderstood, we were going to run an attribute campaign, not necessarily diminish the issues. Rick was on that track too, because John McCain had high leadership quality characteristics and strength. We looked at the 2000 exit polls and we saw John McCain defeating George W. Bush in New Hampshire. McCain beat Bush on attributes, not issues. When Bush beat McCain in South Carolina in 2000 he beat McCain on attributes, not issues. So all of these qualities were very critical for the Giuliani candidacy.

Electability was the most fascinating one because, Bill knows from working with Senator Dole, since we're at the Dole Institute of Politics, back in 1988 he was the electable candidate. Alexander in 1996 ABC, anybody but Clinton, "I'm more electable." But even John Kerry '04, electability nominated him. Republicans were looking for an electable candidate, on who really wanted to communicate. What a lot of Republicans have seen with eight years of President Bush's White House, they really wanted a nominee to communicate. So that was one strength. That was a strength we had and couldn't deny.

Another point, we had to earn this nomination. It was not going to be given to anybody, and certainly not Rudy Giuliani given the social issues and the challenges that we faced. We were less about geography and where we needed to go and I think that was our key challenge, we weren't out to change the social orthodoxy of the Republican Party. Not only were we not, we proved throughout the campaign that we were exceeding on that front in a lot of instances.

If you look back historically, we had Ft. Dicks confirm the terrorist incident in March. That fit with the attributes of the issues, certainly on terrorism, security, leadership, with the economy as fourth at that time, if you could believe it. Going into the May debates and July second quarter, with first quarter fundraising, and going into the summer, we had these twelve commitments you may have read about. I think a lot of people thought they were the twelve commandments as opposed to the Ten Commandments. I won't pull them out here for you, but that really helped get us into the future tense for Rudy's candidacy. You heard a lot about what he did as mayor. The commitments gave us a future tense; they also filled in the gap throughout the summer on issues.

That led us up to the month of August which was very very critical in making decisions about where all the campaigns were, particularly with all the primary campaigns in the states, where they are and where to spend money. At that point, Romney and Senator McCain had proven that they were leading both in Iowa and certainly in New Hampshire. And you have New Hampshire where John McCain had won it in 2000. Mitt Romney had a summer home next door, so the expectations were that we were right where we wanted in Iowa, being a caucus and not a primary, and Mitt Romney had spent a lot of money in Iowa. We had expectations going right into our geographic side. I'll save the months that lead on after this wrap up.

Senator McCain's Campaign

Christian Ferry

Thank you Jon and thank you Joe for hosting this panel. It's particularly nice to be here at the Dole Institute. My first job in politics was as a press intern in the 1995 Bob

Dole for President primary campaign. It's a nice honor for me to be here at the Dole Institute after having been a part of his campaign at the lowest of low levels. We could probably spend two or three panels talking about the strategy used in the McCain campaign because we had so many of them. Our campaign was a roller coaster ride if there ever was a rollercoaster ride, but I think that you really have to break the McCain primary campaign down into two different phases.

The first phase really started in November of 2006 and the strategy was to build a large, national campaign that was going to focus on the early primary states but build out a national organization and national infrastructure. We were going to try to become the new mantle for the Republican Party and make ourselves the next guy in line. There's this saying that Republicans always nominate the next guy in line. John McCain had run for President in 2000 as an insurgent, we had lost. And so we were looking to become that next guy in line and to really become the national frontrunner. After the 2006 elections there was this vacuum in the Republican Party and we decided it was an opportunity to really step out, probably a little bit sooner than we had anticipated, and to define what that is going to be for the Republican Party going forward and try to become the messenger for that.

Chris, building off what you said about issue based versus attribute based campaigns, if you go back and look at the speech John McCain gave November 16, 2006—which was really our first campaign speech, at the GOPAC Conference—it was a very issue based speech. It talked about how the American people were still center right, that 2006 hadn't been a defeat of Republican principles, it had been a defeat because we had lost our way on corruption, on spending. There was a big policy proposal on making America competitive in the world, fighting wasteful spending and getting back to fiscal conservatism. Interestingly, if you read that speech, there's only one paragraph about Iraq. It was a brief little mention, but it was a distinguisher not only between John McCain and the other Republican candidates, but also between John McCain and President Bush at the time. I want to read the paragraph, because it's just brief. He said, "Americans are tired of Iraq because they're not convinced we can still win there without an intolerable loss of additional lives and resources. I understand that, but in no other time were we more morally obliged to speak the truth to our country as we see it than in a time of war. So let me say this, without additional combat forces, we will not win this war." That was the only mention of Iraq in that speech and it was very issue based. Pro surge, pro putting more troops in the field, but it really wasn't about McCain's character.

Jon, you started off the panel by saying you wanted to hear the plan if all things went well. Well, nothing went well for our campaign at that point and that plan didn't work. We were not able to become the national frontrunner. Rudy Giuliani took that position. We were not able to raise enough money to maintain this national infrastructure and it was pretty clear after the first quarter of 2007 that we weren't going to have the resources to build that national campaign, yet we continued to do it. By the end of the second quarter of 2007 the campaign fell apart. Well documented personnel changes happened. Two distinguished fellows, Sarah Simmons and Christian Ferry, were fired from the campaign along with hundreds of other staffers and the campaign was millions of dollars in debt.

A couple of days later, or ten days later, there was a leadership change in the campaign. I got this great offer from Rick Davis. I was sitting at the beach and he called

me and said “wouldn’t you like to come back and work on this McCain campaign that everyone says is over and done? And by the way, we can’t pay you for a couple of months.” I rushed back to DC to jump at the opportunity to be a part of the McCain campaign. Sarah was wiser. I called and tried to get her to come too, but she said “not quite ready for it yet.” That period of July was really a new start for the McCain campaign. We had nothing to lose. We were down and out. We were millions of dollars in debt. We could not run the national campaign and really started to focus on the early primary states of New Hampshire, Iowa and South Carolina. We continued to look at Michigan as an option. We didn’t really consider Nevada as a state we could compete in.

It was all about Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina for us. The other thing we did, we couldn’t afford any polling at this time, so we went back to some polls that had been taken in May of 2007 and we found this chart. It’s an interesting chart if you can look at it. Basically 38 percent of the electorate was split between John McCain and Rudy Giuliani and there was a big chunk, 17% spilt between the two of us, could go either way. So we had an 11 percent core, Giuliani had a 10 percent core and there was another 17 percent of the vote floating between us that was accessible to us. Mitt Romney was out to the right of us, so was Fred Thompson. 23 percent that was probably further to the right than Mitt Romney. At the time this was kind of Newt Gingrich voters, Mike Huckabee voters, Fred Thompson wasn’t yet in the race. So we realized that in order for us to succeed we needed Rudy Giuliani to come down. We needed to pick up some votes from Mitt Romney on the right, but we didn’t have to worry about Mitt Romney voters hopping over us to vote for Giuliani and Giuliani voters hopping over us to vote for Romney if we could stay viable. That was really the key for our campaign in that period, to stay viable. We stole a line from Merle Haggard, our campaign theme became “If we could make it through December.” If we could make it through December, stay a viable campaign, kind of hope for Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani to fight each other and pick up what fell off from the two of them, we would stand a chance to win those early primary states. What quickly became clear with Mike Huckabee’s surge in Iowa, that lost focus for us and we staked our campaign on winning the New Hampshire primary, using that momentum to South Carolina, to Florida, to Super Tuesday and eventually to the nomination.

General reactions on the Republican Primary

Jonathan Earle:

Fantastic, thank you for those. Just before we get to the more direct questions, I’d like to open things up to the rest of the panel and ask how you all, from your reporting or your research, saw the state of the campaign once the votes were about to be cast.

Adam Nagourney

I’m not taking anything away from the McCain people or McCain, who I think did do a lot of gutsy things. They did pull the campaign out from nowhere. This campaign was very much a last man standing to me. Again I mean that with respect to all of you. I can go through pretty much every single one of the major candidates and say why I don’t think you were ever going to get the nomination. I would never put on spandex, but I’m from New York and I’ve known Giuliani for a long time and I never

thought for a lot of reasons, none of them disparaging, well maybe a little bit, that he would get the Republican nomination. The triple M thing. I think Huckabee with maybe more time and more money. To me the story of the Republican race was last man standing and again I say that not taking anything away from the fact that you guys ran a very very spirited, gutsy campaign in New Hampshire.

Sarah Simmons:

No I actually think you're totally right about that. Christian has a long history with McCain, with the McCain family and the McCain organization. At the end of 2006 I was coming off the Schwarzenegger campaign. I got a call from Beth, I got a call from Terry Nelson and I was thinking, you've got a Triple M. At that point Giuliani was the next biggest campaign and you're sort of going through it and fundamentally there are things that are undeniably true about politics and John McCain was the candidate to me who had the best chance of getting through that primary process.

Kelly O'Donnell

I enjoyed the memories of hearing some of these events and, remembering them in real time, the sunniest expectations of each of the stories that you told. It's interesting now, especially with the campaigns that didn't succeed, hearing how things unraveled. Having spent time with Bill and the Huckabee campaign, I was particularly struck by the importance of retail politics, the importance of being perceived as tireless and how significant that was early on. Huckabee's success was his force of personality coupled with a political resume, a point of view resume, which gelled with many people. But his personal charisma, especially if you're covering it for television, was very important. Senator Thompson had a terrific resume but was very quickly perceived to not have a fire in the belly. That was one of the persistent questions and I remember the first time Fred Thompson went to Iowa, the state fair, that is a candidate's right of passage. It was an aerobic journey through that fairground because he moved so quickly. I'd never seen a candidate not pause, not shake more hands. He did not appear to have a comfort factor with that necessary element of retail politics. They had this early conception of using new media, speaking directly to voters and bypassing traditional media, that sounded so good. In reality, people want to get to know their candidates, especially in Iowa and New Hampshire where they are professional voters. They needed that.

I was also struck by how Mike Huckabee's cool factor, as you describe it, was so unexpected because he was playing the bass. I went to many of his events and they were filled with young people. Filled with people who just wanted to see what he was about. And he was a very entertaining candidate. When you would attend a McCain event, it was a whole different kind of charisma. The town hall format where he would take anything that was coming at him had a different sort of interest level for people who wanted to attend. But if you knew that Mike Huckabee was going to play the bass at the end you had a lot of attendance and a lot of fun for those people who were covering it. For television that kind of stagecraft was invaluable. When you talked about the blogger call, I remember trying to convince you that I was a blogger too because my work also appeared on MSNBC.com. That was unsuccessful. But when you talk about 350 interviews, much to Mike Huckabee's credit, he spoke to me on camera, many many many times. He was very accessible and it would be things like jumping in the van with

him with the camera man in the passenger seat up front and talk the entire way to the next event. That is a lot to expect of a candidate who has to do a lot of other things between events, returning phone calls, planning, getting themselves collected, and so he was very accessible. That was hugely helpful to us in telling the story. It was also helpful to the candidate who had less money. It was always amazing to us that I was getting phone calls from the Giuliani campaign urging me to go to Florida and we were really compelled, especially on television, to be in Iowa and New Hampshire, those early states. From our mandate, we had to follow that calendar. So all those attempts to spend more time with the mayor simply weren't logistically possible. Those days were incredibly fun.

I also should say that while there is a lot of tension and there is an adversarial relationship, I have the greatest respect for political professionals. I appreciate the difficulty of what you do, the good spirit in which you do it, the patience you have for us. We can be colossally annoying. It's great fun, so it was a wonderful ride. I appreciate what you've done. We certainly wish you all well and we look forward to the next time.

Geoff Earle:

If I can jump in on Christian's chart for a minute, you had these two giants among the group of Giuliani and McCain. The largest chunk of voters was there for the getting between them. I'd like to talk about this period of time where McCain was stalling, he was losing money, he'd built to large a campaign structure, looking too far ahead and so he was listing. This was congruent with Giuliani who has very high name recognition. He has got a reputation as a hero of 9/11. This was his opportunity to try and punch McCain and make something happen but for whatever reason Giuliani did not. Maybe because he was not in sync ideologically with the party or maybe because of the bad luck with the events that came up during the campaign regarding his children and his family and what not, his divorces and mistress and this kind of stuff, he had some tough breaks. But Giuliani couldn't do that, this is what allows a candidate like Mike Huckabee to run on charisma and intuition and some smart decisions but not a huge campaign budget. That's what allowed him to make some things happen in Iowa. It's interesting, you guys were fighting over that finite but large group of voters and the frontrunner couldn't make that happen.

Chris Henick:

I believe it was Rich Lowery who wrote that the Giuliani/McCain people were national security voters and Romney and Huckabee were conservatives and evangelicals. I don't think it was that simple at all, it fact it was all four at the same time. I know we were going after all four of them. I think you're talking about not being able to go after McCain when he had a chance. What was working for Rudy, and why it was working so long, he was the frontrunner at the time in all the debates. He wasn't attacking any other Republican and it was working. The question remains though. That was through August and September. It really would have made a difference going into the fall months of October, November and December. I think that is the basis of Giuliani's reluctance to go after the Senator when there was a chance. The multicandidate race was working for us, it was helping us. We preferred that as opposed to trying to eliminate it and make it a two person race or a two candidate race. He certainly respected John McCain, Senator McCain. He knew him personally and will forever remain very close and I think that was

a strategic decision that they made. Clearly there was an opening and I'm still confronted by the Romney people saying 'you didn't do your job well enough.' I hear the same thing from the McCain people saying 'you didn't do your job well enough going after Romney.'

Once again the mayor respected Governor Romney and knew him well too, but there was a chance, even greater than with McCain, to make contrasts drawn against governor Romney on fiscal issues as well as with independents in New Hampshire, because that was the biggest challenge. We were both fighting over independents, but independents were coming the mayor's way based on his healthcare proposals where we could have contrasted with what governor Romney did in Massachusetts with healthcare. We definitely had all kinds of angles to make a contrast.

Sarah Simmons:

I'd like to comment on that. There are a few things to consider during the yearlong primary process that we were all a part of at various stages. You start off at that early part leading on national polls but on the McCain campaign we always felt, well that's meaningless, because you have to win these early contests.

Christian Ferry:

That's because we weren't winning them.

Sarah Simmons:

True, but the part of leading those national polls is what that does from a fundraising angle. It makes you a frontrunner. It makes people have to pay attention to you and frankly, the call day that you guys did in January, it scared us. We saw that and thought, well now we aren't the front runners in terms of national polls or in the money race. That was an early indication.

Beth Myers:

That was a strategic decision too. We thought, how do we make ourselves into the frontrunner? We can't do it on name ID overnight. The way we could do it was to do this big splash fundraiser. I said to Spencer Zwick., this is not a tactical thing just to raise money. It's a strategic and very very purposeful event.

Sarah Simmons:

And that's why I think the national polls matter, but then you do have that underlying reality. The way you win the nomination is this path through these early states and by winning those delegates. We also know if you look historically at the Democrat or Republican primary, the polling positions change dramatically depending on who wins those races. Howard Dean was crazy ahead, then he lost and he never rebounded from that. We had charts and charts and charts of things that we gave as fundraising presentations for why it matters that we are not winning on the Washington Post survey but it matters that ARG shows us up six in New Hampshire or whatever. In some sense this was our strategic response to make sure people didn't think we were out of the race.

But it is one of the things that you have to battle. So why didn't Giuliani attack us when we were stumbling or why didn't we attack them?

I think it's very easy to second guess but when you look at the reality, what you have to do for a year, I don't think any of the campaigns were interested in going in on full attack against each other because you knew it was going to start in January and it was going to be really challenging to maintain that. I remember those early discussions, you were in a lot of those meetings, when we were having those discussions about when it is the appropriate time to bring up this piece of OPO or this piece of OPO because you knew that when it happened it was going to begin, it was going to be the beginning of the end. I think it's very easy to sit from the outside and say 'why did you do that?' It is these multifaceted decisions that you have to make.

Ed Rollins:

One other thing that was a factor this time was that the paid media didn't work like it had historically. You spent more money on paid media, so you know it better than anybody, because there were so many other sidebar things that were going on. Iowa and New Hampshire really are retail politics. The one thing that got us in this race was the decision we almost didn't make, which was the straw poll. Obviously you had the resources. Our second place meant when he walked out of the room with low expectations, all of a sudden he was a media darling. If we hadn't done that straw poll he would have never been a factor. If you think of all the money that was spent on television by all of you, our little floating cross Christmas card played over and over and over again. I think to a certain extent the role of cable television now, and the ability to drive your message with that, which is twelve fourteen hours a day, is totally different than I've ever seen before. And you may be able to argue with me, because once again I didn't have polls and I didn't have paid television. Just as an observer of the process I don't think paid television worked like it used to, to where you ran a commercial and really saw numbers move dramatically.

Adam Nagourney:

In retrospect, was Aimes the stake for you guys. In other words, you gave him the opportunity to do this come from behind victory. I remember the whole weirdness of that night where Romney won but Huckabee got the headlines.

Beth Myers:

Right, we were very pleased obviously to win because we didn't have a natural constituency in Iowa, so it was a challenge for us. We were very pleased to have won it. One of the things that Aimes did, there was this jumble of candidates over on the right. After Aimes it was very clear to us, if it hadn't been before, that the jumble on the right was very quickly going to turn into a Huckabee candidacy. And so after Aimes, absolutely, we were celebrating and there was a contingency there that was really happy he had beaten Brownback and I thought no, timeout, that was not a good thing. Brownback had the expectation that he was going to win so Huckabee winning was very very bad for us.

Adam Nagourney:

Because Huckabee would not have won Iowa had he not won this straw poll.

Beth Myers:

That was very significant.

Ed Rollins:

I'm convinced if we had not won Iowa, had you won Iowa, you would have had all the momentum going into New Hampshire, very tough for McCain to beat. Where we got distracted, the idiotic thing we did was to go to Michigan. We should have gone to South Carolina.

Beth Myers:

I was surprised you went to New Hampshire. I thought you were going to go from Iowa to South Carolina.

Ed Rollins:

We had to take advantage of the media, it was there, so we had to go there. The other thing that happened with South Carolina, your candidate had to do the mea culpa on the confederate flag from 2000. We were bound and determined. We had Beasley as our state chairman, he had been the governor who got entangled in the confederate flag. We went in there saying we are not going to touch this flag. I said 'we are not going to touch this flag with a ten foot poll' and when he said 'I wouldn't touch this flag with a ten foot poll' the flag was all of a sudden wrapped around us. Of course you did a very effective job of making sure it was wrapped around us.

Sarah Simmons

Well I do thing Thompson staying in the race in South Carolina was significant.

Ed Rollins:

He finished us. Thompson, "I'm the real conservative." I can give you the quote.

Sarah Simmons:

I should let Christian talk about that.

Ed Rollins:

I was also with the candidate who didn't want to go negative.

Adam Nagourney:

Was that for real? Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt. Was that whole thing for real? The whole announcement?

Ed Rollins:

Here's the story. We were getting killed by them, they were pounding us. We did not know in the sense that we didn't do polling, but everyone was telling us that we had to fight back. I was arguing there were certain states in which negative ads do not work.

Oregon is one, Iowa is one, and Minnesota historically is one. You do them and it backfires on you. We had reached the conclusion that we needed to fire back, just to rally our troops. We only had two days before the thing. So we cut a spot, and it was a fair spot. My real drill, what I wanted to do, was to drop the opposition research, which I had a package about this big, give it to all the press and the media and hope that with the last two days they would lay out all the things that they had done or hadn't done and let the media do the job. That was the initial drill. What happened, I got up that morning and I watched television from 5 to 7 and there wasn't one single spec of space anywhere, and I thought, one commercial is not going to work. I called Mike. I said 'Mike you are very unhappy about this, your family is all torn up about this, let's not go with the thing.' And he said, 'well I've got these things in the morning and we won't be able to talk about this until 11:30,' which was why everything was sort of in place with the press conference, which was a real mess. The idea of the press conference was not the spot. We were going to show the spot, we were going to give everybody a copy of the spot. We were going to put a package out there of everything he had done as governor, the whole opposition research, and then expect you to do the rest for the last two days. Equally important to what we wanted to do, no one in Iowa knew we weren't going negative. So we wanted to make sure that people in Iowa knew we weren't going negative.

Chris Henick:

Let me make a point Joe and Jonathan, back to Aimes and the challenge we had with Iowa as a national strategy, a national candidate, a delegate candidate, not as a caucus/primary candidate. We saw Aimes, as a straw poll, not a delegate poll. It had no delegates and we were hoarding and saving our money strategically. I think we were the first campaign ever in the Republican Party to decouple the Aimes straw poll and still think we were going to participate in the real caucus where there were delegates. So it's going to be fascinating to see future Iowa strategy and if they will follow that and not participate in Aimes but still have an intention to hold off and still participate. Because we were, despite the outcome of Aimes, Rudy Giuliani was second place in Iowa up to October. So there was this tension, are we really going to play in Iowa, or not play in Iowa? There were two distinct wings in the camp that did not want to play.

Joe Gaylord:

Chris, can I just ask a question. When did you decide to play period?

Chris Henick:

I think the question is when did we decide not to play?

Joe Gaylord:

You weren't going to play in Iowa and you didn't play in New Hampshire, you weren't going to play in South Carolina and you were going to play in Florida. As an observer, the question is, why did you put that off so long?

Chris Henick:

You're looking at it from that perspective, it's backwards. There was not strategy to go 0 and 6.

Joe Gaylord:

You put that much more harshly than I did.

Chris Henick:

Well the question is how can a delegate strategy candidate end up with no delegates. What occurred and what I think Geoff alluded to, chronologically, in September we had the Petraeus testimony, when Moveon.org attacked Petraeus. We hopped right on that and it also gave us a chance to go after Hillary Clinton on the willing suspension of belief. We never thought we'd have both the NRA, with guns, September 21st, and the values opportunity speech on October 20th to draw common ground. So we both had opportunities, and to face that challenge with what orthodoxy was presented. So we were really moving through September, and then October was critical.

If you look at November with Pat Robertson's endorsement on November the 7th followed by Bernie Gerick's indictment for federal tax evasion on November the 8th, the very next day, followed by the 18th of November when there was the expected endorsement in Florida that would have meant a lot of momentum for a non delegate strategy, and then the November 28th YouTube Debate when we were in debate prep and 4:00 in the afternoon the Politico.com story broke on what Geoff was talking about, the Mayor expenses trying to hide in obscure agencies, and thanks to the New York Times it was on the front page. But at least the New York Times had the correction that it wasn't all factually accurate. We were running an attribute campaign and when you run on character and leadership, the bottom fell out in New Hampshire. Up to December 1 New Hampshire voters know one thing, and they study elections, they see daily movement, and when the bottom fell out in New Hampshire despite running ads on Tested and having the opportunity on contrasting with Mitt Romney, we had not choice but to go to Florida.

Beth Myers:

We were bummed out when you pulled out of New Hampshire, because we were looking at the same numbers that Christian was looking at and the same exact diagram.

Christian Ferry:

I think there was also something else happening late in the year, going forward in September, that something was Iraq. Iraq changed significantly. John McCain had been this early advocate of the surge. As I mentioned before, it was really about the issue of Iraq whether we are going to change our policy and put more troops in. The President made the decision to do that in the first quarter of 2007 and by September we were actually seeing real progress in Iraq. The situation was improving. General Petraeus was coming back to give a status report of good news. We hadn't had any good news in Iraq and I think Iraq became an attribute issue for John McCain because he had had the foresight, the knowledge, the warrior background, the leadership, the war hero. All of that came together. You know, 'I saw this three, four years ago, called for a change in strategy

and I was right.’ That allowed him to come back on an issue that had been a real liability. The Iraq war was not popular in New Hampshire. By making it an issue about leadership, about judgment, an issue about character, we were able to talk to New Hampshire voters on that issue in a way that we hadn’t been able to prior to that point. I think that was something Rudy Giuliani was trying to take up as well, but when you had Mayor Giuliani talking about the war in Iraq and the war on terror and John McCain, who actually proved to be right on the issue of the surge, it was much more difficult for the mayor than it had been for us.

Sarah Simmons:

The no surrender tour and the impact of the surge, what that did for John McCain, it allowed him to talk about Iraq. He had spent the first half of the year talking about it in very somber tones, which is appropriate. It’s a war where many of our young people are dying. It’s all very serious. There is frankly this negative energy around the way he was talking about it. He could suddenly change the pace, talk about it in a much more positive light, talk about it in a much more successful light. It gave him an ability to really draw the distinction that he had asked the President for this change. There was a distinction between his policy on Iraq and George Bush’s policy on Iraq. That was frankly very important for us to survive that period of time. It did give him a different tone, a different color. We eventually had to run, the party had to run into the fall with very low job approval for the President and all that.

Republican strategy in a difficult political environment

Jonathan Earle:

I want to change the subject just a little bit. Hearing that Beth and Governor Romney had almost the same chart that you guys did, was there a Republican campaign in this cycle attempting to enlarge the electorate? In other words, you guys were fighting over these voters while it seems to me that Senator Obama was collecting cell phone numbers and pushing voter registration.

Christian Ferry:

Well one of the reasons that he was able to do that was that as a party our approval ratings were low. The President, who was a member of our party, had all time low approval ratings, the right track wrong track numbers in the country were not in the right direction. It was a very hard place to be as a Republican candidate. We learned in the general election just how hard it was to be a Republican, but in order to grow the party at a time your party is unpopular, Obama had a great advantage there. The Democrats had a great advantage there.

Sarah Simmons:

The media environment for them, too, you look at when we were really the nominee in March when Huckabee dropped out in Ohio, we got 1189 delegates, and on June 3rd when Barack Obama really became the nominee it was a fascinating race. I always said if I hadn’t been doing the job I was doing, I’d want to be a PhD candidate that was getting primary access to all that data because it was fascinating. You know, first

African American candidate, Hillary Clinton, a really dynamic woman. The media attention surrounding it allowed them to go pick up voters. They went and organized in states where Democrats had never had a competitive primary and it did draw in new voters because, frankly it was a sexy, exciting race to be a part of.

Ed Rollins:

The other thing was you couldn't run away from Bush. Bush got down to 29 percent approval rating and 80 percent of those were Republicans. Anybody even took one step away from Bush and you paid a price for it.

Jonathan Earle:

I want to let Nate have a chance because he actually has the numbers.

Nate Silver:

I'm trying to draw a diagram. What I'm a little surprised about is that we're talking today about electability, but you didn't really hear much of that during the campaign. I wonder if any of the staff here thought about saying, 'well were not going to be traditional conservatives, we're going to run to the center because that's the way we're going to win this campaign,' maybe criticize Bush and try and get independent voters in primaries like Michigan and New Hampshire. Say 'screw the base,' maybe not quite that explicitly.

Sarah Simmons:

That's not how you win primaries though. I think everybody that's been involved in Republican Party primaries knows that's not how you win a primary election. Our job was to win a primary election because that's the first step in winning a general election.

Bill Lacy:

That would have been the kiss of death, Nate, in a Republican nomination fight.

Christian Ferry:

If you were an independent voter who was unhappy with George Bush and you ask, 'am I going to play in the Democratic primary or the Republican party,' then you're going to play in the Democratic primary. I don't think there was much opportunity to go after those voters, particularly in the states where the Republican and Democratic primaries was open and on the same day.

Kelly O'Donnell

I think if anything you were trying to out Republican each other to be perceived as more traditional and more conservative and not as independent. For Giuliani and McCain I think their independence and their social views that were a little bit further to the left were liabilities.

Nate Silver:

But if were talking about expanding the electorate there are a lot of people now who identify as independent who were Republicans two or four years ago. The moderate

Republicans didn't disappear, they're calling themselves independents now. You can reach out, maybe not expand the electorate to new voters but maybe to people who recently left your party and say 'it's a bigger tent, there's more here to do than just the conservative right.'

Sarah Simmons

I don't think those people left because of social issues. I think those people left because of the revolution that Joe Gaylord was a part of in the early nineties. Because many of those members of Congress who'd been in Washington were all of a sudden taking money from Jack Abramoff and were going to jail. And you had a President who was involved in an unpopular war. It's not your fault, it's the reason that I became a Republican. I'm not being critical of you, I promise. That's when I became a Republican.

Joe Gaylord

Let me take on the McCain campaign.

Sarah Simmons:

You look at those people and you say, 'those guys were reformers, and they fought against Dan Cassidy who used to open his drawer and hand out money,' and all of a sudden they're the criminals and they're the bad guys. That's why those people left the Republican Party, because the Republican Party spent us into debt. That's why those moderates left. What you're presenting, it's a much more challenging picture. Traditionally it's not how you win a Republican primary.

Christian Ferry:

A line that McCain used throughout the primary was 'Republicans went to Washington to change Washington and Washington changed us.' That's a big reason why a lot of those independent voters moved away, because they'd been attracted to this contract with America and the '94 revolution and making government work. Government didn't work when Republicans were in charge towards the end and that was a big problem.

Ed Rollins:

See I never understood, and I've been doing Presidential campaigns for a long time, why we go to Iowa and New Hampshire in January. Four electoral votes. Hawaii has four electoral votes. If we went to Hawaii and had a primary in January, we could change the whole dynamics of the party, we could reach out to independent voters. We'd all be fighting to go there.

Chris Henick:

We ought to make you the next Republican National Chairman.

It's true, but you look at those states and you say, 'how do I win in Iowa and South Carolina,' two relatively traditional states. Iowa is the oldest state even throughout the course of the General Election, the voters that were considered swing voters or

undecided voters up until the last day were white women over sixty. You look at that and I think it's a pretty conservative issue set that you're going to talk about.

Nate Silver:

You have to win Iowa or New Hampshire. So it's a New Hampshire strategy I suppose.

Sarah Simmons:

Right, but in New Hampshire if you looked at the 2000 results when John McCain won there, you'd see a bunch of independents that went in there and pulled a Republican ballot. Looking at the election and the dynamics of it, I don't think anyone on our campaign, and I wasn't there during the final decisions going into New Hampshire, but I don't think anyone on the McCain campaign thought lots of independents were going to go in and pull Republican ballots.

Geoff Earle:

I wonder whether you two would have any criticisms for this current process. John McCain had such a well-honed brand over decades, of being an independent and a maverick who would take on the President and do what he thought was right. And he had a very popular President. I understand what McCain's own views are as a father of the surge and that he was on board with the Iraq strategy but he didn't have any room in the Republican primary process to be that candidate, if he wanted to be that candidate. Was there no path to victory as the John McCain of 2000?

Christian Ferry:

I'm not sure that it's about being the John McCain of 2000. George Bush wasn't President in 2000 when we were running for President. It was a very different world in 2000. In 2008 he was the incumbent President, he was still very popular with people who were going to turn out and vote in the Republican primary and on the main issue, the war in Iraq, John McCain and George Bush agreed, that a surge of troops in Iraq was necessary. He has supported the President's decision to go to war in Iraq. Trying to say that he should have distanced himself from Bush on the defining issue of the day, one of the most important, defining issues, one they actually agreed on, he wasn't going to try to be something that he wasn't for the sake of separating himself from George Bush. One of the things that changed early on in the process was that his initial position on Iraq, that we needed additional combat troops in November of 2006, he'd been saying it going back to 2004, that was a distinguishing point with Bush. After the President initiated the surge it was no longer a differentiator, John McCain was once again aligned with George Bush. Come the general election we could no longer stand up and say "we opposed the President, we fought for this new strategy" because at that point it was all muddled up, it was the Bush strategy. No one was willing to say, "I remember John McCain four years ago standing up for this."

Adam Nagourney

Didn't you guys, per your question, didn't you guys toy with trying to do the electability argument? I would hear aspects of it at times. The Giuliani argument, "I can win all these Democratic or independent voters."

Chris Henick:

Yeah, that was my earlier point that I was trying to make. It didn't work in '88 or '96. It clearly worked in '04 for the Democrat. We were faced with it, so why not take it? It was there for the asking. So we did run with it. You start losing electability when you fail to contrast. Your activist party voters begin to wonder if you really the strongest in the fall. If you're not willing to fight in a primary, can you fight in a general?

Adam Nagourney:

Is that true with Democrats and Republicans? It is definitely true with Democratic voters.

Chris Henick:

I subscribe to it on this party. I do think it's pretty much a fools gold too. It will disappear on you very quickly.

Ed Rollins:

Giuliani and McCain were suspect among real conservatives.

Sarah Simmons:

That's what I was going to say.

Ed Rollins:

You clearly were suspect. And the maverick tag. It wasn't just George Bush. It was John McCain, a man I have great admiration for, has pissed off a lot of Republicans. The Feingold and the immigration issue, which was really the issue which he basically had to duck and move away from in the course of the primaries. He wasn't about to debate his position on immigration. If he would have I don't think he would have been our nominee.

Kelly O'Donnell:

But it came up all the time at town hall meetings and the reaction in the room was often hostile and people were very upset about it. Sometimes he would just explain and explain to try and put that aside, and climate change would come up. Again this is early states, town hall meetings and very active voters. The independent ideas that you're talking about weren't always things that would get into stories that I would do in two minutes at 6:30 at night, but if you lived through the events day after day you knew those were tough issues. Likewise with the fair tax for Mike Huckabee. There were strong advocates for it and people that were just railing against it. People were very suspicious of his spending in Arkansas. So you had all of those internal dynamics of voters in the Republican Party who identified themselves in different bands of what it means to be a

Republican and they were defiantly clashing in those early goings. It was tough to be any of these candidates at that time.

Sarah Simmons:

Right, and I think regarding the electability question, why we wouldn't have brought that up, with the activist group of people that you deal with during a primary, this is probably true on the Democratic side as well, when you say electability they hear soft on the issues I care about. On the right, I think what electability means is medium on the life issue, medium on spending and maybe you'll raise taxes.

Jonathan Earle:

But you get in these moments like that situation with Governor Romney when he said, "I'll double Guantanamo." People on my side thought, "what is he trying to do?" Some he's got a reputation as a competent governor, he saves the Olympics and here he is talking about something like this. Electability is just something that...

Adam Nagourney:

Did Romney go into that debate meaning to say that?

Beth Myers:

It wasn't a line that we'd rehearsed. We all know that everyone has lines, but I think the point that he was trying to make is that Guantanamo is a very complicated situation. As we try to untangle Guantanamo, the point he was trying to make is that this is not the time to let loose, we need to double down on terror. It didn't come out quite like that, but he wouldn't step away from that.

Geoff Earle:

I think you're right. I think there's a big contrast with Democrats. Electability was not a dirty word with Democrats this cycle. People were hemming and hawing, they wanted a winner.

Beth Myers:

Sarah nailed it. What electability means in a primary race is squishy.

Sarah Simmons:

Yeah, maybe he'll switch his position, if it makes him more electable, on the stuff I care about.

Bill Lacy:

Chris mentioned that Dole was the electability candidate in '88. That was our theme. But that was our theme because George Bush was the Vice President for a guy named Ronald Reagan who was a very popular conservative. We couldn't go to his right. Philosophically Dole wasn't to his right, so we argued that and we lost.

Christian Ferry:

In 2000 John McCain tried to make a case on electability, that he was the only Republican who could beat Al Gore. We actually ran an ad, and the graphic in the corner was a USA Today poll that showed McCain beating Al Gore. We know how successful that effort was for John McCain. And ultimately he wasn't the only, well...

Nate Silver:

Let me phrase it a bit differently: do people think it's a problem for the GOP that the primary base is so conservative that you can't have different coalitions like you might have within the Democratic Party in the primaries?

Beth Myers:

I think we do have different coalitions.

Sarah Simmons:

Well I think two things. I think the bigger problem that the Republican Party faces, Ed talked about it earlier, is tact and tactical issues like blogging and how we communicate with voters and all that stuff. The bigger problem this election cycle was message related. We had a smaller base. When we went through all our micro-targeting stuff and were making these budgets based on how many voters we need to contact that are our base and are people we know are going to vote for us, the numbers were astoundingly small in some states. That's the bigger reason right now. People are not identifying with our party on a message level. Do we need more bloggers to communicate with them? Yes but first we need to figure out what we are going to say to them as a cohesive party that people can get behind.

Nate Silver:

What I'm saying is if people are always running to the base, about 22 percent of America identifies themselves as both Conservative and Republican, it's not all that big. If you keep doing that it becomes kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I suppose that's the only votes you'll get.

Sarah Simmons:

I think we need to expand our base through what we talk about, by figuring out how we talk about the issues that define our party.

Beth Myers:

The country still is a center right country.

Nate Silver:

I don't know what that means. Pew did a survey where they asked voters if they were conservative, liberal or moderate. Of people who said they were conservative a plurality said they want some form of national health insurance. A majority want the Bush tax cuts repealed. I think you can say that it's a center right country because conservative is a stronger brand name than liberal, but beyond that I'm not sure what it means. It's like saying "I'm a Ford customer, I just don't like any of their cars."

Sarah Simmons:

That's exactly what the problem is, what does conservative mean. It can mean a variety of things. It may mean some help with healthcare, but does it mean a national healthcare system that taxpayers pay for from bottom to top or does it mean helping small businesses? Does it mean figuring out a way for them to access healthcare plans that are affordable? What you're talking about are two very different things. What our party needs to do is figure out how we talk about those issues from a conservative standpoint in a far more, frankly, marketable way. When Arnold Schwarzenegger talks about climate control or when he talks about greenhouse gasses he doesn't talk about how we're all going to have to eat hemp and drive cars that don't accelerate; what he talks about is how we're going to build a hydrogen highway so you can still live the life that you like, because he knows that's a much more marketable idea than everyone having to wear a hemp sweatshirt and clogs. That's why he's a Republican that wins in a Democrat state. I know that sounds sarcastic but I don't mean for it to because I think that's a huge part of what is the problem with our party right now. And you know what? You're right. We need to figure out how we do MySpace better and Facebook and blogs and all that.

On the dilemmas associated with early primaries

Ed Rollins:

I'm not saying that's the secret. Our dilemma is that we start in Iowa and New Hampshire. And no matter what else, no offense to Joe who is an Iowan who first raised the flag of Iowa, Iowa is a retail state. It's not going to go away. It's more significant than ever. Huckabee came out of there. He gives hope to any other candidate. Obama came out of there. It's now right up there with New Hampshire. The problem is that the primary process was so contracted this time and it was crazy. Going back to the last man standing, I mean even last man standing, which you guys were, you were broke.

Christian Ferry:

Actually, we were three million dollars in debt.

Ed Rollins:

How this idiocy... I got asked by the New York Times, "how much would it cost to compete in all these states?" I said, "\$500 million." That became the point, if you're really going to compete in those states. We didn't compete in those states because we couldn't afford to compete in those states.

Sarah Simmons:

But isn't there a benefit to that too? If we really believe that part of the strength of our country is voter participation then isn't there a value to going to these smaller states where a candidate like Mike Huckabee who doesn't have any money or John McCain who doesn't have any money?

Ed Rollins:

I'm not arguing against that. What I'm arguing is the way they've become, the way they were all so contracted this time, there was no recovery time.

Christian Ferry:

The problem isn't necessarily that we all start in Iowa and New Hampshire, it's that we have front loaded the process.

Beth Myers:

And the winner take all.

Christian Ferry:

I think starting in Iowa and New Hampshire is actually a very beneficial and important thing because money is not the determining factor in those two states and they are two retail politics states. They are two states where the citizens and the voters take their responsibility very very seriously. They talk about it in bars. "Are you going to vote in the primary? Who are you going to vote for?"

Beth Myers:

The people are wonderful and all of us who've gone through this process and have gone to New Hampshire and Iowa have come away with an incredible respect for the voters.

Ed Rollins:

You'd love my Hawaiian primary though.

Sarah Simmons:

A lot nicer there in January I think.

Joe Gaylord:

From early on were any of you or any of your campaigns involved in moving the primary calendar around or were you totally hands off that operation?

Chris Henick:

Joe, I'll tell you what, that's a good question. We saw that the Democrats were moving the primaries up, particularly in New York and Illinois, places where it was going to benefit Senator Clinton. We of the Giuliani campaign were all for that because it looked to move up five big states where our national strategy was located. So we didn't get involved because we didn't really have to. They were doing the work that we thought was strategic for us.

Joe Gaylord:

With the last man standing strategy that Nagourney was talking about, was there any kind of conversation between campaigns about what was going on in Iowa and who could help who in New Hampshire or South Carolina?

Beth Myers

Yeah, did Fred stay in as long to help John McCain?

Bill Lacy:

No

Joe Gaylord:

Did any of that happen at all?

Bill Lacy:

No, we stayed in the race because we honestly believed that we had to win in South Carolina to have any chance to win the nomination. If you look at the Rasmussen daily tracking poll in mid September after we announced, Fred was number one nationally. There was a steady slide after that, just a steady, consistent erosion after that. By December 12th, which was the day of the Des Moines Register poll, we believed that Fred was the best candidate in the race. That's when he took on the moderator in that debate. All your guys started raising their hands to answer the question and he said, "I'm not into hand raising today" and all their hands went down at that point. And we thought he was the best candidate from that point on but from the announcement to that point in December it was a steady downward fall, a steady erosion, so we were out of it by that time. We didn't think we were, but we were.

Jonathan Earle:

I want to leave some time for questions. So if you do have a question the mic is over here and Chelsea and Clarissa can help out with that. But, is there any plan afoot to decompress the primary calendar for next time around.

Sarah Simmons:

I think the genie is sort of out of the box. It's very difficult

Joe Gaylord:

Did they pass that thing at the RNC, at the convention?

Beth Myers:

It's alive still. The Ohio, and Wyoming and Wisconsin. It's still alive

Sarah Simmons:

The hard part is that anybody that wants to be relevant now knows that they need to be at the beginning of the process. What state is going to say, "we're going to move ours back a bit." That's where it becomes a challenge to negotiate it.

Joe Gaylord:

Did this starting early just eat up resources, time and energy or did it not make any difference?

Christian Ferry:

It certainly ate up resources.

Beth Myers:

It was just the lay of the land and we just played.

The extended Democratic Primary

Geoff Earle:

Beth do you want to go proportional like the Democrats? That didn't work out so well for them.

Beth Myers:

I think the Democrats got an advantage over the Republicans by stretching out their primary. I was at an event at the Kennedy School with a Barack Obama representative around the time of the Kentucky primary who said "we are just ecstatic about this because we are building our general election organization. We're going to have an organization in Kentucky that has ten thousand volunteers and we just need to flick the switch on it in the fall." When she said that to me I was thinking of you guys and how much you weren't going to have any of that opportunity.

Christian Ferry:

Indiana is the perfect example.

Sarah Simmons;

Indiana is a great example.

Geoff Earle:

And North Carolina.

Beth Myers:

As a party I think we need to make sure that we don't cede that territory to the Democrats. Proportional is a way to make the process go longer but I haven't really thought about whether it's good or bad.

Sarah Simmons:

The other problem with the way our primary extended. Huckabee stayed in until March. Every Wednesday we woke up and thought, "how much more do we have to spend? What's the minimum amount we have to spend?" That was a real frustration on our end because we didn't have a ton of time to recoup and the story for the media was, "is McCain going to lose Virginia to Huckabee?" And the fact of the matter is that we didn't lose Virginia.

Kelly O'Donnell:

There were some on the last night.

Beth Myers:

You weren't building an organization.

Sarah Simmons:

Right, because our race was not anywhere as sexy and exciting but it was sort of like the negative drum beat from the media and us trying to figure out whether we can spend sixty cents.

Christian Ferry:

We didn't have the money to be building an organization. We had been a three state campaign. Our people from Iowa went to Florida and our people from New Hampshire became our February 5th headquarters. We were just hop-scotching staff all over the country because we didn't have any resources to build that out ahead of time. So when it got to the point of after Super Tuesday and then having to run campaigns in Virginia and Ohio and Texas we had to figure out who was free. It was two guys who had left Iowa six weeks ago and were still in Florida and they'd already been to Missouri twice and we'll send 'em to Texas and let's try to put something together real quick. That was a very difficult period. We didn't have the staff, we didn't have the resources, we were broke. And no matter what we did, if we'd win then the media would report, "they didn't win by enough" or "Mike Huckabee won conservatives and that shows a real problem for McCain going forward." It was really a difficult situation for us.

Ed Rollins:

It would have been a great birthday present for me on March 19th if you'd have offered us the Vice Presidency and we'd have quit right then and supported you.

Questions from the audience

Jon Earle:

We are on a tight schedule, so let's hear from somebody in the audience, and we already have someone.

Question:

I'm with a group called American's for Prosperity and we appreciate you coming to a blue county in a red state. We appreciate you being here. Saxby Chambliss, a Senator in Georgia, just won his race and I listened to him and he said why. He said, "because I remembered the tenants of Ronald Reagan and I ran on those principles." It seems to me if we as a party don't get back to the principles of Ronald Reagan, why don't we do that? The other question I have is who's going to be the leaders of our party?

Sarah Simmons:

I think you're right. To be honest with you I think you're totally right. We have to get back to the tenants that are widely held and people believe. Who the leaders are going to be is an open question. You know, we don't know who that is today. Who the RNC Chairman is going to be is secondary to who actually takes the mantle on issues and how we communicate those issues. I just think it's an open question.

Christian Ferry:

One of the things we need to do as a party, I love Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan is one of the things that inspired me to get into politics, my political hero, everything else, but we need to take those principles of Ronald Reagan and make them relevant to young voters today. Voters who are 18 years old were not born; Ronald Reagan was not around. During their formative years of high school and college Bill Clinton and George Bush were President of the United States. When you start talking about Ronald Reagan to younger voters their eyes glaze over. They don't get it and we don't make those principles relevant. That's a big challenge. What our party needs to do going forward is figure out what is it about the Reagan principles, the conservative principles, that matter today.

Ed Rollins:

For the first time we are a true opposition party. We have no part of the governing process. It's a perfect time for us to articulate what we are. It may just be that we are against a lot of things. Even if we are against them, we have to articulate why we're against them. We are now on a socialist track and the word socialist may be more clearly defined in six months or a year or what have you. We're going to spend more money than we ever have before. We're going to see the benefits or we aren't going to see benefits. As a party we have to somehow coalesce around certain ideas, whether it's being fiscal conservative, having a strong national defense, rebuilding our military, or taking care of our troops when they come back. What are our priorities?

I used to have great conversations with Newt Gingrich about the importance of the message versus the messenger. I'm a great believer that the messenger is a key. Ronald Reagan became President because he wasn't Jimmy Carter in 1980. But the fact that he had a very core message and belief and agenda, people all of a sudden started listening to it and they could understand it. As a messenger, Newt Gingrich had a very clear-cut, core message. It was a message that Joe helped take from 25 ideas to a message.

Sarah Simmons:

But that's part of rebuilding our base, because right now we're a party of old, fat, white guys in Washington.

Ed Rollins:

That's me, and I'm in New York.

Sarah Simmons:

In 2006 I was in California and I was working for Schwarzenegger. He doesn't look like a typical Republican and he doesn't sound like a typical Republican. He's got a tan and he speaks with a really thick accent. You know, we're watching that and I remember Danny Hastert doing a press conference after the Mark Foley scandal and I remember thinking "that's not me. That's not the people that I work with in this huge diverse state. They look different than that. They're young people, they're women, they're Hispanic small business owners." Expanding who we're talking to is what you're talking about. How do we expand our base? I think that is an idea and a messenger-

based thing much more than it is a tactical thing in the primary. The umbrella has to be built before we stick in the individual prongs.

Bill Lacy:

I think we all need to keep in mind that in 1980, in the 70's and the early 80's, the Republican Party was the party of new ideas. We were the party that was applying conservative principles to the problems that we faced at that time in history. We've lost that over the years. In the year 2008 the Republican Party was the party of George Bush. George Bush did not govern as a conservative, not according to Reagan's principles. I think that came back and bit us. Christian, you're absolutely right. We've got to apply those principles to today's problems.

Jonathan Earle:

Let's get to one more question because we do have to take a break and get to the next session. Let's listen to the question and then see if we can get back to the second part of the first question of who are the emerging leaders in the party?

Question:

My name is John Sedick and my question is this: You seem to have grand strategies for you campaigns but it seems that so many of your campaigns had to fight against opportunistic events that came over you, or vulnerabilities or news reports about expense vouchers or phones ringing at the NRA convention. There were all these things that happened to you while you were going some place else. Did the strategy really matter?

Ed Rollins:

I'm someone who believes two things about this business. First and foremost, your candidate matters and second, your campaign matters. You sometimes can win with a great candidate and not such a good campaign. You can't win a presidential election unless you have both, and you can't win a presidential election unless you have a strategy. You can't do it tactically day by day. You've got to basically say, "this is how I define my candidacy, this is how I define my opposition." That's a strategy. To a certain extent we've gotten away from being good strategist and we've become very much good tacticians.

Christian Ferry:

The 24 hour news cycle plays a big role in that. It's changed the way we've strategized. It's about winning everyday. And if you think about trying to win everyday then you are going to change your tactics to try to win everyday. That makes it very hard sometimes to stick to a strategy. The things that you talked about that get thrown at you are many times expected, but you just don't know when they're coming. That's part of the fun of this business. I think it's why we all do it. You never know what the next day is going to bring in a campaign. The successful ones are the ones that are able to take advantage of those situations.

Sarah Simmons:

I think that is why strategy matters. You do need to build out, to say “here’s what our plan is.” Somebody once described a good campaign as a bunch of tumble weeds and they all combine into a big tumbleweed ball, which I guess is a good analogy while we are here in Kansas. In reality you’re trying to keep this massive organization on a highway and there are exits and entrances and they’re not spaced evenly and they’re not all the same size. Every part of your organization like the universe where chaos could take over at any moment. That’s why strategy matters even more, so that you can try to keep on the highway and so that fewer of the little organisms of your organization are falling off to these distractions like what happened at such and such convention on such and such a day, the stuff the news cycle is throwing at you. I think you’re right, I think we have gotten obsessed with tactics.

Chris Henick:

Jonathan, to try and answer your question of the next leaders and where the party goes, I think what was lacking in the Republican primary was the lack of a movement, a grassroots takeover of the Republican Party like draft Goldwater in ’74 or even ’72 McGovern for the Democrats and certainly Ronald Reagan from 1976 on to 1980 where there was a dramatic movement. I really think we didn’t have that this time, nor did we have a generational challenge like the Democrats. We will likely have a generational challenge in 2012. Republican governors just met in mid November in Florida. Typically you’d see a non Washington personality crystallize around a leader, an executive. But the first need is to do what Ed’s talking about, get your principles and let a personality crystallize around them.

Jonathan Earle:

Yeah, if I could put you guys on the spot, if we could go around, we have about three more minutes. I’m not going to put you on the spot and ask you who you think is going to win the nomination, but who do you see as the face of the Republican Party over the next four years?

Ed Rollins:

I think it’s the governors and I think whether we like it or don’t like it, Sarah Palin is going to be a very significant part of this party. She’s going to be the most significant fundraiser. The only handicap she has is she’s in Alaska and she can’t be running to Iowa and New Hampshire. Equally important, I don’t think she’s quite sure what her principles are at this time. I don’t see any Washington leader emerging at this time and no offense to the House Leaders or the Senate Leaders, I just don’t see anybody coming forth that everyone is going to unite around. But I do think that could happen with some of these governors, past and present.

Jonathan Earle:

Anyone else going to take a stab?

Beth Myers:

I think it's the governors too. And I think they did a really good job at the RGA recently in articulating a mandate.

Adam Nagourney:

Do you guys agree with Ed that Sarah Palin is sort of the dominant figure in the party?

Ed Rollins:

Well I say dominant, she's the one who can raise the money. She's the one that everyone's going to want to have campaign for them. When voters get a hold of her again I don't know what happens.

Christian Ferry:

I agree that it is probably going to be the governors but as for which of the governors it is going to be, I think that is probably way up in the air. It's going to be awhile before that is all sorted out. Our party has a lot of soul searching to do and a lot of things to do before that person comes forward, but I do think Governor Palin is going to be a significant player in that.

Bill Lacy:

I think the governors of the party are definitely going to be the face of the party, but I wonder sometimes, and maybe we can get some insight later from Joe Gaylord. I think Newt Gingrich may be the brain of the party in regard to taking the conservative principles and figuring out how to apply them to today's problems because that's our biggest challenge.

Chris Henick:

And that's a 40 pound brain that Newt has, trust me.

Sarah Simmons:

I think it would be great if we could organize 500 young business people across the country to run for state legislature, because I think one of the things that Sarah Palin proved is that we need work on our bench on the Republican side. She did 99 percent of what we asked her to do. She did with skill and there were just a couple of things that she just needed more practice before should could do them as well as we would have wanted her to do. And that isn't her fault, that isn't our fault, that's just a reality of our bench right now.

Ed Rollins:

To your point, I got asked the question 1000 times, of course I live in New York City where there's 79 thousand McCain supporters out of 1.8 million voters. I get asked the question all the time, why Sarah Palin? Why not some other woman? I explain that there are eight women in our party and now Mrs. Dole is gone, who are senators or governors. That tells you the whole problem. Meanwhile, Democrats, by the day, are adding more and more and more to their bench. We just need to go out and really focus.

We need women leaders, we need minority leaders, we need Hispanic leaders and we have to start looking at the demographics. We've got a lot of districts that are safe Republican districts through the efforts of Joe's and others. We've drawn some districts where a Republican can win and we've just got to make sure that some of these people get through the primary and become future leaders.

Jonathan Earle:

I think on that note we're going to bring this session of our 2008 Post Election Conference to a close. We will reconvene for the Democratic Primary Session in exactly fifteen minutes at 4:00 and thank you very much to our panel. That was fantastic.