

## **Dole Institute of Politic Post Election Conference**

### **Session Four: The General Election, Part Two**

#### *Panelist:*

Geoff Earle	Adam Nagourney	Nate Silver
Christian Ferry	Kelly O'Donnell	Jonathan Earle,
Steve Hildebrand	Matt Rodriguez	Moderator
David Kurtz	Ed Rollins	Bill Lacy, Moderator
Joe Lenski	Sarah Simmons	

#### **Bill Lacy:**

Good morning. Welcome to the Dole Institute of Politics and to the final session of the Post Election Conference 2008. We're delighted that all of you could join us. I have a few announcements. First, please turn off all cell phones. Secondly, we will allow for a few questions immediately following the session. Please queue up in the back of the room at the microphone. For the panelist, please make sure you speak into the microphones. We have a lot of material to cover this morning, please help us get through that material. Finally, we're getting a little bit of a late start. I apologize for that. We looked at our flights and we have to conclude this by around 11:10, 11:15. I'm going to ask all of the audience to please assists us. Most of our guests have to catch planes immediately after this session, so please assists us by not glomming on too much to our panelist. If you glomm on too much we will talk to you.

Let me begin with some very brief introductions this morning. To my left is Jonathan Earle, assistant director here at the Dole Institute of Politics. Steve Hildebrand, deputy director for the Obama Campaign. Matt Rodriguez, Western Regional Director for the Obama Campaign. Adam Nagourney, New York Times. Geoff Earle, New York Post. David Kurtz, Talking Points Memo. Joe Lenski, Edison Research. Then we have my old friend Ed Rollins. Nate Silver, 538.com. Kelly O'Donnell, NBC News. Sarah Simmons, Deputy Director for the McCain Campaign and Christian Ferry, Deputy Campaign Manager for Senator John McCain.

Fourteen weeks ago today the Democratic Convention ended. Senator Barack Obama – it was fourteen weeks, I counted it up – Barack Obama had a magnificent speech in Denver that night. I watched it. I thought, “the Republican Party is in trouble.” And the next morning something happened that really fundamentally altered the election. Christian, Sarah, tell us a little bit about the decision to put Governor Palin on the ticket.

### **The Announcement of Sarah Palin**

#### **Sarah Simmons:**

I'm going to defer to Christian. He was a little more in the loop than I was. I found out about the same time Kelly found out, when it was announced on the news. But it was exciting.

**Christian Ferry:**

I think that to understand Governor Palin's position on the ticket you need to go back to when John McCain and Governor Palin first met each other. That was early on in 2007 shortly after we wrapped up the nomination. The Republican Governor's Association was meeting in Washington and John got together with a number of the Governors who were in Washington, the Republican Governors, to talk about the campaign, their involvement in the campaign, thank them for their support and talk about moving forward. Governor Palin was attending the conference, she was at that meeting. I think everyone who was at the meeting walked away incredibly impressed with her. She spoke with great passion on energy policy, which was a growing issue on the horizon for us and was becoming a more important issue on the campaign. She spoke about reform in Alaska and we all thought she was a very impressive Governor.

I can't speak directly to the decision to select Governor Palin because I think it was John McCain's decision. I was not in the room for that discussion. Needless to say I think he determined that she was an exciting candidate. She would inject some enthusiasm into this campaign, not only on the right but also in the center because she was a reformer. At the time she was very much a reformer. She brought a fresh sense of enthusiasm to the campaign that hadn't been there before. It was funny for me because the night of the Obama speech in this outdoor arena with 80 thousand people and fireworks I was in the Middletown Inn and Suites in Ohio with the Governor of Alaska who we were hiding from the media and getting ready for the announcement tomorrow. I was watching that speech and thinking, "I don't know how we get over this. This is one of the most incredible spectacles of political theater," but little did I anticipate the power of the woman who was in the room next to me to put an end to that bounce. We were trying as a campaign to keep her under wraps. It was probably the only major decision we made in the campaign that didn't leak out. But one of the reasons we didn't want it to leak out was because that was Barack Obama's night. It deserved to be his night. It would have really been a shame if that had leaked out that we were going to make this announcement tomorrow on what was deservedly Barak Obama's night.

That next day when she walked on stage to the crowd in Ohio they were totally shocked by her pick, they didn't really know anything about her and she gave a speech that was world class. There was really emotion in that room that I hadn't seen on the campaign trail before. John McCain was speaking and introducing her and most of the people in that arena had arrived prior to the news breaking, they had no idea who the pick was going to be. They knew that the pick was going to be made there. McCain was introducing her and she was still backstage. He used the pronoun her or she and there was this audible gasp. Who is it? This is different. And then she walked out on stage to people with enthusiasm and emotion, tears. I think you spoke earlier about some of the crowds that you'd seen at the Obama rallies and the emotion there. That was there in Ohio that day and it was one of the first times on the campaign trail so I was quite pleased with the way that pick happened.

**Sarah Simmons:**

As just a tactical side note, one of the things that we had noticed as lowly pollsters throughout the race was that the numbers were tremendously stable. Barack kind of

operated in a certain window and we kind of operated in a certain window unless and until something very explosive happened. The celebrity ad was an example of where we did something really explosive and the numbers changed dramatically. Reverend Wright was another example of something really dramatic happening in the race and then having an impact on the numbers. So a lot of our time in the strategy camp of the campaign was spent thinking about how we introduce something into the campaign that, explosive sounds like a very negative word, but how do we introduce events that draw this kind of attention? Inject that energy in the race to have that sort of dramatic impact. So our only advice to the people making the VP pick was “please don’t pick someone boring.” There were tremendous talents on that list that, frankly, weren’t going to inject excitement into the race. So from our perspective, when it started to leak out who that was, we were completely psyched.

## **Initial Reactions to Sarah Palin**

### **Bill Lacy:**

What did some of the rest of you think when you heard about this choice, and I’m specifically going to the Obama Campaign.

### **Jonathan Earle:**

Especially immediately after it was made.

### **Bill Lacy:**

Yeah, immediately after it was made.

### **Nate Silver:**

When I heard about it I thought it was a great choice. When I saw the event in Dayton I was not as impressed. I think she’s someone who immediately triggers some kind of reaction from people and I was on that skeptical side. I thought she was in a little bit over her depth just at a gut feel level to me. Clearly it was something very important in the campaign and clearly that’s what all the talk was about. The morning after Barack’s speech, which was when I thought the Democrats had a great candidate, she was the center of discussion. I thought that alone was valuable.

### **Kelly O’Donnell:**

And part of that was the surprise factor. You could not have done a better convention. Everyone thought that he would give a great speech and he had a great night. But there was an element of the country that was expecting it, perhaps pleased that he delivered it. I don’t think anyone expected the kind of head snapping. I can tell you, I was at a small airport trying to wait for the Vice Presidential selection. Until midnight I watched Senator Obama, now President Elect Obama. I was in a tiny little private airport hoping to intercept. I didn’t know that Christian was already in Middletown under the name Upton, hiding the Governor of Alaska. If you’re a reporter covering it, it is relentless and agonizing trying to find out who the Vice Presidential nominee will be.

When Joe Biden was selected there was a certain expectation and a surprise factor, certainly. When you’re a reporter covering it you try to find out who all the likely

picks could be and then as someone who does television and has to talk endlessly on cable, I memorized pages of facts about Tim Pawlenty and Romney and a whole group of people. I was stumped by Sarah Palin. When we first learned, and I'll admit it was not my reporting, someone knew that an airplane coming from Alaska was arriving in Ohio and the people I was talking to assured me that it was not the candidate. I was not smart enough to ask if it could be the candidate's family on the plane. That was the circumstance. That plane was her family. Thank goodness I had my laptop outside the Dayton arena because I hit Wikipedia to learn a lot about Sarah Palin very quickly. So it was that kind of an impact. Not only was it a woman, the first for the Republican ticket. It was an unknown, so we had not had the buildup. I had a piece about Tim Pawlenty all ready to go for the Today Show. I had one about Romney all cut and ready. Those of course went direct to my video collection. So the surprise factor was a step that was unexpected. It didn't diminish the greatness of your convention, but it was one moment that people will talk about for a long time.

**Christian Ferry:**

I would just say, Kelly referred to the story of getting her into Ohio under the cover of secrecy. I think it's one of the fun stories of the campaign. I won't go through it now but there is one thing that no one really reported that I think is a defining moment. If you've worked for John McCain and been around John McCain you know that this man has crashed four airplanes and he's a survivor. You have to have some faith that things turn out right when you're around John McCain because he's already used seven lives and he keeps surviving.

When we walked into this Middletown Inn and Suites under the name Upton with the Governor of Alaska who no one recognized and no one knew who she was, we had two suites. One for her and her family and the other was going to be a staff suite. All the suites had different state names. The staff suite was the Alaska suite. Pure coincidence. I looked at that and I said, "things are right." It was a fun moment in the campaign.

**Bill Lacy:**

Other immediate reactions.

**Adam Nagourney:**

I was surprised. I was following it that morning as you were Kelly. I thought from the start, I was talking to Joe Gaylord about this, that the fact that someone like Kelly has to go to Wikipedia to look her up, that means people don't know about her. It sounds like hindsight, but I really thought, "people don't know a lot about her." We could argue about how much you guys really vetted her or not but the fact was that Joe Biden had been vetted and the bad stories were already known about him so they hardly got any attention at all. I thought it could work, but it struck me as a huge huge huge risk.

**Christian Ferry:**

I would say she was fully vetted by our campaign. We knew everything that came out. We knew everything that there was. This was not a fly by the seat of your pants election. She had been vetted just like the other candidates. I think who doubted her was the media.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

And the Obama Campaign.

**Christian Ferry:**

And the Obama Campaign.

**Sarah Simmons:**

But I think that makes a good point because there was a tension from the media from all these stories about her. Things that we knew and were prepared to respond to but there was a bigger spotlight on them and a higher degree of magnification.

**Adam Nagourney:**

I had a conversation with Axelrod about whether they were going to leak any of the names out and he said no. And I was like, “but it is in your interest to let the names get circulated so the media vets them,” and he said “yeah.” So I was not surprised that who was selected in the end was one of the names that sort of reflected that. If you would have had the media in advance, and I’ll take you at your word that you weren’t surprised about any of that stuff, maybe it wouldn’t have been as big a deal as it was. That still doesn’t get to all that stuff that happened with Katie Couric and all that. That all gets to the fact that it’s hard running for President. It’s really hard and I think she’s example number one of that.

**Kelly O’Donnell:**

But one of the other things that threw us off is you often have your shortlisters doing events for you, speaking for you as surrogates and we saw Romney, we saw Tim Pelenty. We had certainly looked at every female Republican in office as potential, but certainly the signals, and there weren’t many, and the conventional way that things are done did not point to that. So I knew that Sarah Palin was Governor of Alaska in her first term but had little knowledge beyond that, which I wouldn’t admit in any other setting.

**Geoff Earle:**

I was part of the main establishment media to be caught flat footed and not knowing anything about this person. I was with the Obama campaign at the time. There were two people on the Obama Campaign among the press and there were heated discussions about this, everyone was talking about it. I was one of two people who thought this could be a good idea and pretty much everybody thought it was going to be a disaster. What is was, she had not been vetted. She had not been in Washington and if we didn’t know who she was, how could she be any good? It’s really open to debate, because I think she brought a tremendous amount to McCain that he needed. At that point he was throwing long balls. It was a courageous and a bold move but I don’t think anybody could have anticipated the depth gap when we got to substance a couple weeks and months later.

**Sarah Simmons:**

I don't, the depth gap we can talk about as a down the road part of the point, but I think the first thing that you're saying, was the media mad? Was the Washington establishment mad? Yeah, you betcha, but the fact of the matter is, that's why she turned out sixty thousand people. She was a net positive for our campaign in that when she went to events she had a natural ability to communicate with voters. She communicated our message at those events very very well. People were drawn to her in a way that was unique and special that I don't think you see with every politician. So she was a net positive on many of the issues. There were some depth of issue problems on some of the issues. I think we knew going in eyes wide open about that. I don't think anyone was like, "well day two, let's put her in front of Katie Couric." We tried to do our due diligence and make sure that she was prepared.

**Adam Nagourney:**

For Katie Couric?

**Ed Rollins:**

I thought she was a brilliant choice.

**Sarah Simmons:**

We tried to do our due diligence to make sure she was prepared.

**Bill Lacy:**

Let's go to Ed Rollins.

**Ed Rollins:**

I thought she was a brilliant choice. I thought it basically was one of the smartest things the campaign did at that point in time. I had the same reaction watching Barack Obama and your convention, which was one of the best conventions I've ever seen. I thought, "they're going to gain points on this thing and we're never going to catch 'em." I thought she was a superb performer. When I watched her get on the stage in Ohio, I knew from buzz about her but I'd never seen her in person. My initial reaction was, "my god, she looks just like Tina Fey," who I love. But standing in front of an audience far bigger than she had ever been in front of, she was a tremendous resource. I would argue, strenuously, even with all the downsides, any Vice Presidential candidate who can dominate two weeks of the coverage in the fall is a real plus. She did that at the time.

**Jonathan Earle:**

By way of hearing from our panelist from the Obama Campaign, this seemed to be the one time during the General Election where you guys lost control of the agenda. The ball was somewhere else and all of a sudden, and we can ask Nate about this, the polls started going in a direction other than the way they'd been going all summer. What was happening in the campaign? You guys seemed like you were the coolest cucumbers around, but was that really what was happening?

**Steve Hildebrand:**

Well my first reaction was, “Alaska has a female Governor?” I knew less than you did Kelly. You know, I think a lot of our immediate reaction was that she has great potential not to be able to sustain the final eight weeks of the campaign. That the lack of knowledge, the fact that she hadn’t been tested, that the press was probably going to dig harder because they didn’t know anything, that much of the story was likely to be driven by the press, that we didn’t have to do it. That turned out to be the case. Over the first few weeks where she had the shining moments we had the sense that she wasn’t going to wear well over time. Obviously she was someone that we didn’t vet in the least. We had no knowledge of the woman. I think, to the credit of a lot of the leadership of the campaign including Barack, we were a patient group of people who were always looking long term and not short term.

You know, we were certainly mesmerized by the crowds that she was getting and the speeches she was giving and all of that but the one thing John McCain did, he took away the argument against Barack Obama on experience, because he chose someone who was even less of a known quantity. You know, Barack might have had very little national experience going into this but he had been battle tested over the course of eighteen difficult months against very difficult candidates. So that argument was sort of going away, but when she was announced it took that argument off the table.

The final thing I would say, I said this at an earlier post election conference like this, if he wanted to shake things up and if he wanted to take something away from Barack Obama, which is sort of his trademark of bringing people together and working across the aisle, he should have chosen Joe Lieberman. He should not have listened to people on the right. He should have. At that point in the campaign both of us were working to get the undecideds in the middle, our bases were going to be there. That should not have been the concern. Joe Lieberman would have shaken things up in a damaging way to Barack where Sarah Palin didn’t do that. No one could argue that Joe Biden wasn’t ready to take over the Presidency on day one. Arguments against Sarah Palin were pretty specific that she was not ready to take over the presidency and John McCain’s age, which really hadn’t been a huge factor in the campaign, suddenly became one.

**Matt Rodriguez:**

To sort of add, and we talked a little bit about this already, the primaries and the general for Barack were a lot about crossing certain thresholds. In some ways she made it a lot easier on the experience piece. The first major decision you really make is your VP pick. Even though they were in a quandary, she gave the campaign a lot in terms of energy and crowds it didn’t have before. The voters, even after the debate where the media was saying how great she did, we didn’t see that in any of the polling because most voters realized she wasn’t prepared for this job. And it just put a spotlight on his age and what kind of decision making and experience. I think it was to Barack’s benefit, kind of with the decision making process on her.

**Christian Ferry:**

I don’t necessarily disagree with what you said but I do think she was an overall asset to the ticket. I think she’s an overall asset to our party going forward. If you look at what happened to our campaign after Sarah Palin joined, we had a huge surge in

fundraising. We had a huge surge in volunteerism. We had a surge in the base of the Republican Party that we hadn't had before. They were going to vote for John McCain, you're right. What they weren't going to do is come out and work the phone banks, go door to door and volunteer and distribute the flyers. All of a sudden all of that went into place and our numbers on phone calls and door knocks skyrocketed when Sarah Palin joined our ticket. I'd be curious to know from Joe from my reading of the exit polls if people thought Sarah Palin was a major factor in the decision of who to vote for. We won that vote and I think overall she was a net positive. I really do.

**Sarah Simmons:**

And just a note on Lieberman, I think it's easy to say at this stage of the game that we would have been better off with Lieberman but we were facing our convention. A lot of going into a convention is about making sure – I think one of the untold stories is the number of Ron Paul delegates that were on the floor – making sure you get through the convention and driving the story that you want to drive, not getting distracted by a story that we had largely put to rest about the Republican base being fractured and divided. Injecting Joe Lieberman into that and then having to survive a convention where we should be able to drive on the right side of it, I think frankly, that was insurmountable for us. I don't think that was a challenge that we could have overcome.

**Ed Rollins:**

I think Huckabee would have walked off the field and taken his delegates with him. I think Joe Lieberman is an honorable man and I have a great deal of respect for him but in our party it would be like doing something for you that turned off labor. It would not have worked.

**Sarah Simmons:**

Here is an interesting story about polling coming out of the conventions. One of the things that was amazing for us is that there had been a fairly significant gender gap going into the convention. We probably trailed suburban women by fifteen to twenty points with women overall somewhere around ten. Coming out of our convention we not only eliminated that but with some subgroups of women we were up by as much as twenty points. I was nervous about that. I knew we were not the only ones doing polling. They have twice as much funding, they're probably doing three times as much polling as we are and they see this too and it's a matter of time before they put on "she's a crazy pro life person" in the Philadelphia suburbs, in the Denver suburbs. We saw that in Detroit and other places and we thought, "how do we keep swing suburban women with us when they're going to attack her."

I think there was a very solid three pronged attack against her, first on her experience, second on her being too far right and third, kind of subterranean, was an attack on her as a woman that had to raise this child. She has a new baby with special needs, she has a teenager who's pregnant. How can she do all that and still be effective being vice president? I think that gets back to the point Kelly made yesterday about how women are treated in the media. For me it was very interesting because I thought, "who thinks that anymore?" For us that was very interesting to watch.

**Bill Lacy:**

Joe, you had a point you wanted to make.

**Joe Lenski:**

Christian asked about the polling. For that two weeks the way it looked like it could work was by bringing the old Perot style voters into the Republican coalition. For those two weeks her performance appealed to those groups when it was on anti-Washington, anti-deficit spending and maverick style leadership. That appealed to Perot voters. In 1992 those voters didn't care that Perot didn't have government experience. The experience issue wouldn't work. But what happened was that she became so polarizing, especially among women. I saw it in my office. I have a lot of twenty and thirty year old women that knew nothing about her and said, "I saw her announcement, she's interesting but I was a Hillary supporter and she's not going to appeal to me." I think that initial appeal to go after women was probably a mistake. Her approach would be more to Perot style voters and it never paid off. If you look in the exit polls, independents, which was the group that Perot did best among and was the swing group that predicted the vote in 47 of 50 states, went for Obama by eight points. It was only if the Palin choice combined with this maverick strategy could appeal to those Perot independent voters that you could have switched the tide here, and that didn't happen.

**Sarah Palin and the Media****Bill Lacy:**

Let me ask you guys a question. What was the strategy behind the media rollout of Governor Palin?

**Christian Ferry:**

To understand the media rollout – and frankly I think it's something we mismanaged after her initial speech in Dayton and at the convention – you have to remember the atmosphere that she was operating in with the media. When she was announced it shocked everyone. There was a considerable amount of information not just on the blogs but really making its way into the mainstream media that was, frankly, disgraceful. For example, the story that her son wasn't really her son or the attack on her pregnant daughter. So it was a very contentious relationship for her to step into, being under attack from the media and blogosphere on her personal life. One of the finest moments of Barack Obama on the campaign was when he stepped out and said, "this is awful folks, this is not fair, her children shouldn't be an issue." I thought that was a really fine moment for Barack Obama.

So when you look at how she was rolled out you have to remember that it was a very contentious atmosphere. Kelly and I were talking last night about the NBC chant on the floor at the Republican convention. People were really really angry. Angry at the way she was being treated. Angry at the media. We felt it inside our campaign.

**Sarah Simmons:**

The downside of the secrecy and the explosive introduction was that you rolled the Trojan Horse in and we opened the door and instead of tons and tons of troops

running out all of our surrogates weren't prepared. We didn't have a lot of talking points on her. All of those things took some period of time. I don't think we were slow on it but it took a little bit of time for all of that stuff to hit in the way you would have wanted it to. I always say it's kind of like we opened the doors on the Trojan Horse and there's one guy with a plastic sword there to defend Sarah Palin. That was one decision point on our campaign where I wish we could have somehow done both very effectively. I wonder if we could have kept it secret and had everyone as prepared as we wanted them to be.

**Kelly O'Donnell:**

You couldn't have kept it secret doing that, but...

**Sarah Simmons:**

Not on our campaign

**Kelly O'Donnell:**

One of the things that was interesting, because she was unknown to us, people forget that any Governor engages with media all the time, with their local reporters, the TV stations up in Alaska. She would have been very familiar with dealing with those folks. When she did not interact at all, even with local media, the pressure building for "when will we have an opportunity to talk to her" and "will there be some sort of pop quiz." That just got bigger and bigger and bigger. One thing she didn't have because she was so unknown is that the candidates not only voice their own views but then experts do so on the candidates' views and their opponent's views. There were questions about and there were moments that she said things that were not quite in line with Senator McCain's positions. I can only imagine that those were the things that you were fearful about. But I think holding her back just made the media interest increase and probably be even more intent on exposing a problem as opposed in the first few days if she'd even spoken to only Alaskan local media. You might have gotten a friendlier moment or two where people would see her responding to a question instead of just giving speeches, which she did well.

**Christian Ferry:**

I don't disagree with that. Looking back on it it's very easy to say, "well you should have done this differently." But again, looking back at the atmosphere, it was very hostile. We were concerned about what was going to happen when she got out there with the media. What was she going to be confronted with? Questions about her daughter? Questions about her children? It was a difficult position to put her in. It was a very difficult media environment. Looking back on it, yeah, we could have done things differently but...

**Nate Silver:**

To an extent, that was one of her strengths. She did trigger a grassroots backlash against the media. Did you anticipate that reaction when she was picked? Was that considered?

**Sarah Simmons:**

Oh no, I don't think so. Here's what I think as a child of the Midwest. I looked at it from what I knew my whole life. Everybody thought that if you came from the coast you were a lot smarter than some kid who grew up in Kansas. I personally look at it as it's a pile of hooey. I mean she's obviously very smart. She had the guts to take on big oil, the political establishment in Alaska that is entrenched and very very difficult. I had looked in on her when I was on my hiatus from the campaign in 2007. I wondered, "what does our party need right now?" It needs new leaders. Someone told me I should go look at this Sarah Palin person, that she was really interesting. I read about her and I thought that she was somebody who has a lot of street cred in terms of what she's actually accomplished. I think that's what triggers that grassroots movement. A girlfriend who I grew up with in Lenexa e-mailed me after the campaign and said "thank you for Palin. There's a woman who respects her role in her family as a mom and as a wife. She's proud of being a woman. This is a person who's probably a little further to the right than I am but she's a professional and she can do battle." I looked at that and I thought it was a very different perspective than what you get from the New York Times or what you get from Washington insiders. I think that that's what motivated a lot of people in flyover country to be very excited for this woman.

**The Obama Campaign's Reaction to Sarah Palin****Bill Lacy:**

We'll move on to the next critical juncture. I want to go back to Jon's question to Steve and Matt. Let me try to frame this in a little bit different way. After the Palin decision was announced you guys saw all the bounce and all the momentum that should have been generated out of the convention dissipate. The coverage dissipated. The national poll average on realclearpolitics.com favored McCain for the first time. The Electoral College vote later came around for the first time. That's usually a lagging indicator. There were all these calls and a spate of stories about the Democrats in Washington freaking out because the Obama campaign had lost touch with everything. I sat there and I watched you guys, you really just stayed the course. You looked like you knew exactly what you were doing. You were totally unrattled. My question to you is, was that just an image or was that a true picture of the campaign during this phase?

**Steve Hildebrand:**

To your point about the Washington establishment, we were pretty dismissive from day one as they were dismissive of us. We were headquartered in Chicago during the entire time of the campaign. We listened and paid attention but we were more interested in listening to our field organizers in states because they were talking to voters and people in Washington were talking to each other. It's just not representative of reality. To say something about the polling that they were seeing, we were seeing the same things. Our first assumption when she was picked was that we were going to start to lose voters in middle Missouri, voters in middle Ohio, voters in middle Pennsylvania. Those weren't the voters we started to lose. It was the suburban women. It's why you described our strategy the way it was. We went directly back after those suburban women that we thought we could get back. We never thought we could get those voters in the

middle of some of those states back if we lost them. We did lose them with her, we lost suburban women. I think it's one of the reasons we weren't freaking out. It's true, we weren't freaking out. We were the campaign that started with 10 percent in Iowa and 20 points behind the other candidates. We were the candidate that never got ahead of Hillary Clinton in the national polling especially, I'm not convinced until what, a month out or something? We had a mindset that being behind was not that big of a problem, that it was always achievable to get ahead. We were more concerned about what the polling was in the battleground states than we were in the national polling.

**Bill Lacy:**

That's just extraordinary discipline, that's incredible.

**Kelly O'Donnell:**

Was there no panic moment? Share something with us. I mean was there no "oh my god they picked her moment?" Come on Steve.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

No, because very honestly we saw her as a short term selection, not a long term one. She was just not going to wear well over time. In part it is because at some point she was going to be forced to sit down and have hard discussions with reporters. She was going to have to debate. You've got to be ready for these things. Eight weeks is too short of a time to be prepared for a national presidential campaign. Especially one where more voters than ever in history were paying attention and we were in a 24 hour news cycle where reporters weren't just writing a story over night. They were writing several different blog posts every day and five, six, seven, eight different programs on each of these cable shows. It was hard to sustain that over time. We really did feel that she just wasn't going to wear well over time.

**Jonathan Earle:**

It's very clear to me that we could make this entire session about Sarah Palin, but that's not what we called it. So I do want to move on.

**Christian Ferry:**

I think on that point to Steve, we have spent a lot of time talking about Sarah Palin but at the end of the day it was an election between Barack Obama and John McCain and George Bush was the President of the United States and our economy collapsed. There was a lot of other stuff going on in this campaign. I think we're trying to draw conclusions about whether Sarah Palin cost the election. She was the VP pick. She was one of many factors that went into this campaign.

## **John McCain's Suspended Campaign and the collapsing economy**

**Jonathan Earle:**

Let's move on to the next big phase. It was really only a week after the selection of Sarah Palin that the government seized Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae. September 15<sup>th</sup> Lehman Brothers was allowed to go bankrupt and is still bankrupt last time I checked.

McCain's next move, and this goes to a point Sarah made earlier about looking for those explosive moments that you could exploit, John McCain suspended his campaign to potentially miss the first debate. Was this looked at in the campaign as another one of these bold moves? Was it a gimmick as I heard some of you guys report?

**Sarah Simmons:**

I don't think it was a gimmick. The 5<sup>th</sup> you have the Fannie Mae issue. The 14<sup>th</sup> our candidate says the fundamentals of our economy are strong. The 15<sup>th</sup> Lehman falls apart and the 24<sup>th</sup> we announce that we were going to suspend the campaign. When you look at what was going on and the political environment that we were a part of, we were running with the baggage of George Bush who, when hurricane Katrina hit, flew over, didn't land, wasn't involved, he was distant from the problem. A lot of people say he was like that about Iraq. A lot of people say he was distant about many other problems. We wanted to be different than that. We also have a guy that has been in the US Senate, I always forget the number, lots of years. He spent a lifetime being a legislator, being involved in problem solving.

I think you have two issues, how are you different from George Bush and how does John McCain, the guy, deal with a financial meltdown when everyone in Washington was saying, "you are the only guy who can come back and get Republicans to vote for this bill," when all of his financial advisors from Mitt Romney to Wall Street guys and CEOs and heads of companies were saying we have to have this bailout by Monday or the economy is going to collapse. Is it something that we strategically tried to exploit? No, it was a decision that was made on the road in a room full of people that were being told, "this is what had to happen or the economy was going to fail," from a guy that is an action oriented leader in the country. I think that's why it happened, because believe me, as I was sitting in the campaign headquarters watching that press conference thinking, "that means I have to pull down all the television ads?" I was calling Rick and asking if I needed to take down the TV. And they said, "yep, take down the TV." I was thinking that we were already outspent 4 to 1, 5 to 1 at that stage of the game.

**Christian Ferry:**

John McCain has always tried to be a bipartisan leader. This was a time of real challenge for our country. Put the Presidential race aside because for all intents and purposes the Presidential Campaign disappeared from the nightly news for all of two weeks. This was an all encompassing moment in the campaign and in recent American History. I think he saw this as a time where politics needed to be put aside. He wanted to come back to Washington and play a role in building a bipartisan coalition to get something done because everyone in the world who is supposedly smart on financial issues was saying if this doesn't happen we are doomed. We'll never know what might have happened if the bailout package hadn't passed. What did happen is the stock market continued to go down, but we're all still here. What role has the bailout played? I'm not an economist, I can't tell you, I'm definitely not smart enough to do that.

This was John McCain trying to do what he thought was right for the country, to put his country first and play a role in making a package. I think he played a role in that. I think he helped bring the House Republicans along to pass a bill. I think his presence changed the dynamics of the debate where we got some checks and balances on the \$700

billion that was going to be given out to the treasury secretary. So things did change legislatively because John McCain got involved in it. It's very easy to sit here and say we shouldn't have suspended the campaign and shouldn't have gotten involved in that. Looking back and seeing that the market continued to take a nose dive, that's nice to say. Who knows what might have happened if that bailout hadn't passed. Say we had voted against the bailout I think Barack Obama wouldn't have done the same so we would have had that separation there. I think it was frankly a no win situation for us.

**Sarah Simmons:**

Tactically, between the 15<sup>th</sup> of September when Lehman fell apart and the 15<sup>th</sup> of October which was the last debate, I don't know how you guys felt, but I felt like it was nearly impossible for us to drive any kind of message that wasn't getting interrupted by news that today the Dow fell by 800 points. And it was not a trickle everyday, it was huge news of disaster for the economy that I'm sure everyone in this room has been affected by. I wish I had the date in there. The day that everyone gets their statement from their 401k's was another day where our numbers, it was pretty grim. It was grim from the standpoint of trying to talk about anything.

**David Kurtz:**

But it seemed like from the outside looking in that this was part of the problem strategically and tactically. The Obama camp seemed much more interested in addressing those emerging disaster stories on a day to day basis. It was reported, it may have been by you or it may have been in the post, someone on the campaign saying you just want to turn the page on the economy and move on to the next thing. So when you say you can't get your message through because of the economy, I think the campaign at that point had become about the economy so the messaging had to be much more quick to turn around and focused on what people were talking about.

**Christian Ferry:**

I don't think we were trying to turn the page on the economy. I think we were trying to turn the page on the discussion of the bailout package. That was much more to the point of what that advisor was trying to say. If we were going to sit there and continue to debate the \$700 billion bailout I don't think that was going to be beneficial to our campaign.

**David Kurtz:**

Sure, and taking you at your word that it wasn't a strategic decision to try and shake things up at that point, when he did go the things that he set out to accomplish obviously didn't work. The vote for it ultimately happened the next week after he'd resumed his campaign. The reports coming out of him being mum at the White House meeting and not really taking a position one way or the other, the house Republicans were just kicking and screaming about any plan, it was a disaster and I don't think he ever quite recovered from that.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

From our standpoint the only real mistake you made at that time was suspending the campaign, not his actions over the course of the bailout proposals. It allowed us and the press to say, “this is a guy that can’t handle two big things at once.” Barack, at that point...

**Sarah Simmons:**

That was where your claim of erratic really started to stick too. We started to hear that back verbatim comments.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

...it was really where voters across the country saw this guy being steady in a crisis and being able to handle a lot on his plate. It was such a difference between the suspension of a campaign.

**Sarah Simmons:**

I also think some of that is indicative of the environment. Being steady and what he did, not to be critical at all of your actions, what he did in large part was to listen and not do much of anything. I know he was meeting with economic advisors on the back end and I know he was probably calling members and all that stuff. At the end of the day what the picture showed was that he was really doing nothing. He was staying out of the fray.

**Christian Ferry:**

I slightly disagree with you Sarah. I think what he did, and what the Democrats did extremely effectively, was they presented one voice. They were a unified, on message, this is what we’re going to do party.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

It was a point in the campaign where Speaker Pelosi and Leader Reid said, “you’re going to take the lead on this.”

**Ed Rollins:**

The other factor was that this is when you had the debate. Barack Obama stood on the stage and looked Presidential. He was an equal and you had two days of this erratic, and you may never have been able to tag McCain with the erratic. I would say you did wrap Bush around him, but putting that second weight on him – and it was self inflicted as much as anything else. The thing that bothered me as an outsider and knowing the Hill well, when you’ve been away from the Hill for two years and you fired Chris Cox, who was very popular among the House Republicans, it was just a very bad series of tactical things. But I think that day in and of itself gave you the credibility to move forward and for the first time diminish John. I thought it was a very turning point day.

**David Kurtz:**

I don’t mean to bring up Sarah Palin again but you can’t underestimate the correlation between the financial crisis and her lack of experience and these interviews

with Couric. I don't have the exact date, maybe you have it in your timeline but that was happening right at the same time that all of these major issues are coming up but it just reinforced this belief that not only is she not ready but he picked her and things are falling apart.

**Jonathan Earle:**

The Couric interview was September 23<sup>rd</sup>.

## **The Fundamentals of the Economy**

**Kelly O'Donnell:**

The comment that you alluded to, the fundamentals of our economy are strong. My sense when I heard that, when you cover a campaign every day and you know what the candidate is going to say you can almost recite it yourself. My head sprung up when he said it because that was a phrase that he had used previously and hadn't used in quite a while. Sometimes with candidates when they're moving about the stage there are certain safety phrases that are part of their language that just come out. My sense, and I don't know if it was true or not, was that it was one of those. Once it was out it was such a mistake in that moment. It had been a fine thing to say earlier when there were legitimate economic reasons to describe that. Everything else you had to do was to undo that. Had he not uttered that you would not have been in such a defensive position.

**Jonathan Earle:**

It's what the secretary of the Treasury is supposed to say, not a candidate.

**David Kurtz:**

What was your reaction to that within the campaign? I'm just curious to know. Was it instantaneous?

**Sarah Simmons:**

An expletive. Actually a friend of mine I had dinner with last week said he e-mailed me that day to ask if McCain really said it and I wrote back a single word that is probably not repeatable in polite company.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

Taking the politics out of this, this was the first time in a Presidential campaign where virtually every voter in the country was feeling it directly. Whether it was retirees, pre retirees, people not being able to get car loans or buy a new house or people losing their jobs, it was really hitting everybody either directly or somebody they knew who they were close to. At that point it was a question of which of these candidates was going to connect with those people who are hurting everyday. When McCain uttered those words people thought he was out of touch.

## **The Debates**

### **Bill Lacy:**

I think that's an extraordinarily good point and I want to go back to something Ed mentioned just a few minutes ago and get some feedback from everybody on this. How do you guys think the candidates did from a strategic perspective in the debates? Not who won, but who accomplished what they needed to in the course of the three debates? Ed, you made the point that Senator Obama looked very Presidential in that first debate.

### **Ed Rollins:**

You seldom win or lose debates. Historically incumbent presidents never do well in a debate because someone stands on the stage for the first time with them. If you can measure up and look Presidential you move forward. I think the post exit polls on the debates said that Barack Obama won. McCain did well in most of those debates and certainly tied if not even better than people expected. But I do think what happened starting with the first one, which is the critical one, and the last one which was on the economy, is the country got to see him for the first time side by side with McCain and he was substantive and calm. That was his strategy. The words, the answers and all of the rest of it was not as important. He looked presidential and you were not afraid of him in a time of crisis. And you were right in the midst of a crisis.

### **Adam Nagourney:**

I thought the debates were all about Barack Obama all along, about whether he could pass the threshold. I agree it was never about him versus McCain. I think the economic crisis was pretty close to the turning point of the campaign because I'm one of those who think you guys could have won it. I do think if you'd responded to the economic crisis differently you still could have pulled it out. By the time that last debate was over Obama has crossed this threshold and just done himself a huge amount of good. In fact by the time the second debate was over I thought he did himself a huge amount of good.

### **Christian Ferry:**

We were talking yesterday about this election being about Barack Obama and Barack Obama needing to pass this hurdle that said, "yes, this guy can be President of the United States." He did that in those debates. Despite our efforts with the celebrity strategy. Despite our efforts to say "is he really ready? Is he capable of doing this?" In the debates he really did that. He showed he was capable. He stood up, he looked presidential. He is an incredible speaker and communicator. That came across. I think in those debates he really crossed that threshold and was a credible choice. Again, in a change election, if he crossed that threshold it was going to be very difficult for us.

### **Joe Lenski:**

Again, the exit polls go to that point. We asked "which candidate do you think has the right judgment to make a good president?" 57 percent said Obama had the right judgment. Only 48 percent said McCain had the right judgment. So even though McCain still had a lead on experience Obama had passed that threshold. Even on the experience

question 50 percent said Obama had the right experience, 57 percent said he had the right judgment. Those two hurdles were passed.

**Sarah Simmons:**

It was amazing. I watched all the debates from behind the glass at a focus group watching real people. It was very very difficult. Barack Obama is just a great person. He's great on camera. John McCain went in and gave the best debate performances that I think he's probably ever given. Certainly better than all the primary debates that I watched, and I admit that I didn't watch all of them. At some point you looked at it and said, "that's the best John McCain can do. He can't do anything better than that but he's just up against someone that is that much better than him in that sort of format."

**Christian Ferry:**

I think there was one thing lacking from the General Election debates that we were able to accomplish in the Primary debates and that was having one of these McCain moments. In the primary debates they weren't scripted, they just kind of happened. McCain had these moments, whether it was standing up to Tom Tancredo and saying "I'm not going to tell the mother of an illegal immigrant whose son is serving in Iraq that I'm going to deport her" or standing up to Hillary Clinton on the Woodstock thing and saying, "I wasn't there I was tied up at the time." He never had one of those moments in the three debates.

**Kelly O'Donnell:**

Except the "I'm not George Bush, you could have run against George Bush." That was as close as it could...

**Christian Ferry:**

But it was never quite to the level that it was the one thing that came out of the debate. We called them McCain moments.

**Geoff Earle:**

Obama's advantage was he didn't need one of those moments. I think his biggest strength was that it wasn't just his speaking ability and his poise and how he carried himself but he knew who his audience was and what he had to accomplish. He also knew what he didn't have to accomplish. He was not trying to score the most points necessarily. I've never seen someone with so much self control when your opponent is attacking you. I thought McCain was powerful in some of those debates and he was aggressive. McCain would make three points against Obama in thirty seconds and Obama wouldn't bother to answer two of them. He would take the one he wanted to answer and he would move on and he would maintain his poise.

**Sarah Simmons:**

I think the point that you're getting at is what I was saying before about the celebrity thing and the Palin thing and trying to find these explosive energy inducing things into the race. We went into every debate hoping there would be a McCain moment, hoping there would be that energy injected into the campaign. I think the

closest we came was in the last debate when we sort of brought out Joe. I don't think that was the moment it could have been but I think people in the room thought, "oh yeah that is a guy just like me who's really going to feel the impact of these tax increases."

**Adam Nagourney:**

Was there something that McCain was supposed to have done in any of those debates that he didn't do?

**Christian Ferry:**

No, I don't think there was.

**David Kurtz:**

The interesting thing was, I agree going into the general election or at least post convention Obama really had to pass the test in those debates. But by the time the debates actually happened the pressure was on McCain to shake things up. As you indicate that really changes the whole dynamic because not only does Obama get to sit back but McCain has to do stuff that he's clearly uncomfortable with. He was good in the first one but in the other two, maybe he was trying to make a McCain moment, maybe he was trying to shake things up. The more negative sort of in your face style is not comfortable to him. I'd be curious to know what your polling showed, but the feedback we would get was so much of angry old man reaction and not the sort of likeable easy going guy that people have seen in the past from him.

**Matt Rodriguez:**

We got a lot of that, both from our research and our huge operation. It helped us a lot. It really felt like we kept banking votes every time we had a debate. I think there's a lot of pressure when you're behind in the debates. There were two things about the debates. One, the media started playing up this question about whether there was going to be a big moment. But big moments happen that you don't expect. You can't plan those. So saying, "tonight he's got to have this 'I paid for this microphone' moment" is almost an impossible threshold to cross. The second piece we talked about is the format and Barack's longer style you were talking about this morning. It served us perfectly. He was able to explain in a very calm sort of way where he was. He had time to do what he does best. There was a lot of pressure on McCain to do a lot of things. I don't think any of it fit his strengths and I think all of it fit Barack's strengths.

**Ed Rollins"**

I think my friend, my friend, my friend, kind of wore out. It loses its credibility. We've all heard John say that, but when it's 21 times in 90 minutes it just kind of comes off as...

**Barack Obama and race**

**Steve Hildebrand:**

I would say two things. One is that in the economic debate McCain made a fundamental mistake by never addressing the concerns of the middle class. He sort

addressed them but he never once said middle class in the entire debate. The second thing I want to say is, it's gone unsaid today and I think it's an important thing to say, for Barack Obama to pass that threshold, to be viewed as Presidential, he had an obstacle that no one else had. He looked different than all the other Presidents before him. So the threshold was bigger and it took longer. He had everything going for him but there was an obstacle, which was the color of his skin. It wasn't so much about bigotry or anything else, it was that he looked different and the American people are going to take a long time to get comfortable with that. Since the election polling shows very clearly that people think this guy is ready and making smart decisions early.

**Christian Ferry:**

I agree with you but I think part of that was also a strength. If we're talking about an election that was a change election all you have to do is look at Barack Obama and you know that this guy is different. This guy is different than what we have in Washington. It wasn't just that he's an African American. He's 47 years old. He's a different looking young guy running against a white, 72 year old, Republican. Standing on that stage together at the debates, who's different, who's going to bring change? This guy looks a lot different. I think it was partially a strength.

**Nate Silver:**

Yeah, if you looked at the substance of what he was saying after he got the nomination it was pretty standard. It was a healthcare plan and a little bit of redistribution of income. It was a pretty standard Democratic platform. It was different than what he said back in 2007 about special interests and that kind of thing. It was a much more conventional message but it didn't seem conventional, I think because of his age and his race and his style and everything else.

**Field organizing, early voting and new technology**

**Jonathan Earle:**

We actually have to move on again. While we were all busy opening our 401k envelopes and watching the debates, guys like Steve were busy planning the ground game for election day and I want to return to that. Certainly you guys were doing something on a larger scale than the campaigns that I've watched but there was also a lot of hype about it. There was talk about whether this ground game will actually be there when it's needed either for early voting, which was more of a factor this year, or on election day. If you guys could talk a little about how that planning got done and how that execution was handled.

**Matt Rodriguez:**

We really started that, frankly, in July. We always had benchmarks about how we do staff and we went through budgets. I'm still traumatized by the number of times we went through the budgets. I'm sure the state directors hate me and Steve for doing it but this is something we were constantly working on. We had our numbers constantly updated. We had numbers on how many voters we registered, how many contacts we had, what people were saying at the doors. Palin was picked, what does that mean? What

are we hearing? We used a lot of hard research but there was also anecdotal stuff. We had such a large organization and we were able to use that.

I think as we got closer we put enormous effort into three things: voter registration, voter protection and volunteers. We talked about voter registration yesterday and I don't want to beat a dead horse. Voter protection was important. People see things like Florida and how many people do we need on election day. Things like that start far far earlier. We had lawyers on the ground months and months out on the Secretaries of State. More machines, more clerks, more places to early vote. We put, I can't tell you how much energy and time and hundreds of thousands of volunteers into early voting for two or three weeks. There's no better voter protection than early voting. We did everything we could do, all of our mail, phones and everything to drive that early vote up. We had these sporadic voters that we knew were going to vote for Barack if they voted. It's a classic case in the southwest.

**Jonathan Earle:**

How important is the tech in all this and the new things that you guys were credited with doing?

**Matt Rodriguez:**

I can tell you just for California for the last weeks, I was overseeing California. We had thousands of volunteers in some form or another. We would send three or four thousand volunteers every weekend into Nevada. This is just Nevada, not any other states. We registered, our numbers just came up to 50,000 independent of what anyone else was doing. I think they made, in the final weekend, five million phone calls just the state of California. Two million on Sunday alone. And not to a single California voter, all to states like Colorado and Nevada. If you're a volunteer in a state like Nevada, you're Matt Rodriguez and you live down the street, we didn't make phone calls in the battleground states, we had those people at the doors of their neighbors. We had air cover from all of the non battleground states because we had that many volunteers.

**Joe Lenski:**

How much detailed information did you have that you knew how many early votes you already had in the bank?

**Matt Rodriguez:**

You couldn't know exactly but we had modeled out, not just polling, we had modeled out who were likely voters, so we would check every single night with the secretary of state to see who had voted, what their names were. We would score them in our range. We were pretty conservative with our modeling. In Colorado and Nevada we just knew we had a big lead because a lot of our models were just way way off. It was clear that our goals had been met.

**Joe Lenski:**

Numbers are just starting to be certified. Florida just certified their numbers. Obama won the early vote in Florida by more than ten points, lost the election day vote

by 4 or 5 points. If you add this up nationwide our estimate is you guys had a four or five million vote lead in the bank before November 4<sup>th</sup> even came around.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

Well we had the ground game to do it. I want to say a couple of things. One is regarding our field model. We really had a lot of experience coming out of 50 state primaries. We had three different kinds of field models that different states were using to implement the field strategy. We brought, I don't know, about 80 people from the states from all different levels whether it was the 23 year old field organizers up to the field directors and state directors and we spent a great amount of time planning to figure out what was going to be the general election field model. It really came out of our South Carolina strategy. Jeremy Bird, who's one of the rising stars coming out of our campaign and probably deserves more credit for winning this election, it was really the model that he figured out in the South Carolina primary that we implemented, which was building neighborhood teams.

We had the belief that our supporters were the kind of supporters that you always dream about in a campaign. They want to spend as much time every single day, every single week on the campaign. So our volunteers were giving us 20, 30, 40 hours a week. What it allowed us to do, typically in a campaign, at least on the Democratic side, you hire big field staffs and they spend their time knocking on doors and doing four hours of call time every single night and the doing their data entry and reporting their numbers and then they get out of there at midnight. That's not organizing. That's robotic turning out numbers. What we had the ability to do was have our field organizers actually organize. They organized field teams who took this very seriously. There were field leaders. There were people that were responsible for running phone banks. We had wide open access to our volunteers from our voter file online. These neighborhood teams had to report numbers every single night just like the field organizers would, except they were volunteers. If the field teams weren't meeting the numbers that we needed them to meet we would either get rid of them or we would add to their teams or find ways within their team to improve numbers. So our volunteers had to take on larger responsibility if they wanted to play serious roles in our campaign. Field organizers had to report how many field teams, how many field captains they had, what kind of numbers they were turning out and they were really organizing. We asked them to take on not just the organizing but two to three things around their neighborhood. One of the reasons it was so effective was because instead of the 23 year olds doing the persuasion you had your neighbors doing the persuasion. You know, 40 year old women talking to 40 year old women and 65 year old people talking to 65 year old people. It was just much more effective.

On the technology side, going to your point Jonathan, we spent a record sum of money on it. We're not supposed to give these numbers out but I'll give them, we had ninety people on our internet team, on our new media team. And they weren't just doing the website. They were producing videos, they were slicing and dicing the people that signed up to decide who was likely to give more money, what kind of messaging we should deliver, how this was helping the field operations, all of that. We also spent a record amount of money on internet advertising. In the end I want to say it was around \$8 million of advertising on the internet alone. That really really mattered. In part I think it changed how campaigns need to communicate with voters. I'd be surprised if anybody in

this room has a different experience than I do, but when my nieces and nephews come to visit, I've got four flat panel TVs around my house and they don't turn them on. They sit in front of their computer. It's true, they're not watching DVDs on these nice TVs, they're watching DVDs on their computers. It's true, there are three of them hovered around one or just one, whichever the case is. We bought – I don't even know how this works because I'm too old for it – we bought advertising on video games.

**Jonathan Earle:**

Yeah, the Xbox billboards were really smart.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

I didn't even know you could do that

**Sarah Simmons:**

I think there is an important point about that too, because I think you all did remarkable things. I'm actually good friends with Scott who was a part of that team. One of the things we talked about is how to make sure those people online are involved in your organization, have real world impact, even if that is through facebook or myspace. One of the advantages that you had was your dramatic advantage with voters under the age of thirty. For us basically all of these decisions are resource allocation. Where do we put our energy? Where do we put our time? We were trailing so much with young voters even if we had them interacting and doing all the things they could online. It would have been good and certainly important for us tactically but I think our problem was deeper and broader than whether we were on facebook in a meaningful way.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

A fundamental point that Howard Dean made in 2004 where he had an unprecedented internet presence and fundraising from the internet, a fundamental mistake that he made was assuming those who were online with him were going to vote for him and volunteer for him. What you saw in the Iowa caucuses was that first, they weren't strict enough in who a supporter was. It's one of the reasons he lost. They were turning out other people's supporters much the way we did with Hillary Clinton's women in New Hampshire, but it was a lesson we took away from the Dean campaign in '04. We recognized it immediately. Late in January one of the things we said was, "just because you're on our website doesn't mean you're a supporter, it doesn't mean you're going to be helpful." The field staff was required to take those people offline and either get a solid written commitment, a signed pledge card or on top of it, put them to work as a volunteer. It was instituted in the campaign that it was a strict requirement. You don't call them a supporter until there is either a verbal or written commitment from them, or both.

## **Media bias and the Obama candidacy**

**Bill Lacy:**

Okay, I'm sorry, but we need to move on because Jon and I have three more topics that we want to briefly bring up and then try to leave a couple minutes for Q and A. We want to get everybody out of here on time. I want to get some reaction to this.

Mark Halprin said at one of these conferences, quote, “it’s the most disgusting failure of people in our business since the Iraq war. It was extreme bias, extreme pro-Obama coverage.” End quote. He said that about the news media’s coverage of this campaign. What’s the reaction to that?

**Adam Nagourney:**

Mark is a good friend of mine and I think he’s one of the most brilliant political people that I know. I’ve been meaning to talk to him about this. I was on vacation. Was there some bias towards Barak Obama? Yeah. Was there some bias towards George W. Bush in 2000? Yeah. Was there some bias towards Bill Clinton in 1992? Yeah, it’s part of the process. Do I think it affects the process? Not in a huge way. My objection, and I should say this to Mark directly and I will, is the wording of it. He said that this is the worst failure of the media since Iraq. For that to be true someone needs to give me an example of stuff that we in the media knew about Barack Obama, about his background, that we did not tell or distorted. Conversely, some positive things that we did not report or people distorted about McCain. Do I think there was some bias towards Obama? Yeah. But I think that happens all the time. There was also bias towards John McCain in the year 2000.

**Sarah Simmons:**

One of the things that I thought was interesting, as a person who was process manager for all of our TV ads, I made sure that everything we did was fact checked. I made sure of it. I personally did and every single one of our ads that came out that factcheck.org said was a lie. This includes one where we basically had a clip of Barack Obama saying something. I don’t know how that is a lie. It’s a video tape of Barack Obama saying something. It was a difficult press environment for us. I think it was one of the many obstacles that we had. Our people who were on TV doing surrogates for us who had done it in past election cycles that they were amazed at the questions they would get when they were side by side with Obama folks. The questions they got were just much more difficult.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

But keep in mind that there was a fairly long period of time where there was a love affair from the press with John McCain in large part because you had so much access directly to him. Reporters did not have that same kind of access to Barack Obama. They were highly critical. Halprin was one of the most critical, saying, “when am I going to get to sit down with you candidate?” He said it over and over and over again. So I think it is important to recognize that there was this love affair because of access to McCain that existed for a long time, until you guys shut that down.

**Adam Nagourney:**

I read this stuff. I didn’t do it myself. My impression was that there were a lot of organizations, fact checkers, the New York Times, the Washington Post, that found major problems with your ads – and some of your ads as well.

**Sarah Simmons:**

Some of it was comical. We were in our office saying, “how can it not be true if it is a video tape of Barack Obama saying something. How is that not true?” It’s not like we surrounded it or clipped it. We hit close to the line, just like you did. That’s how this game is played. The reality is that not every single one of our ads was filled with lies. It’s just not accurate, you know.

**Kelly O’Donnell:**

I think part of what it was is that certain narratives are enforced. You were able to paint McCain as negative and had evidence to back that up and it becomes bigger and bigger. When there were occasions that there were very credible challenges to an Obama ad maybe it didn’t get the same attention. I hope and I think there will be a lot of dissecting of all of this print and television to look at it in many different ways. The kinds of images that were used, the kind of space in a paper, the amount of air time, all of that ought to be looked at. I think there were moments that McCain might have been favored and Obama might have been favored. One of the things that we tried to do, when NBC received criticism, and I hope viewers are really persistent in raising their decisions either way because I think that’s how decisions get changed.

One of the things that we talked about in very minimal ways was, well if the Obama story led yesterday should McCain lead. Things like that where there were talks about balance and amount of time to each campaign. One of the things that often happened is, if you were leading the agenda on something, what happens is Barack Obama gets to assert his affirmative idea on some topic and the McCain presence can sometimes be hitting him. That is a different level of tactics. So if you’re perceived as always being the one that is critiquing that can give viewers and voters a negative impression. And try to make certain, I would often argue about whether we doing enough about the candidate in both cases, what they have to say about the topic as opposed to just the reaction to the other candidate because those sound bites in our business are usually the ones that are the most potent. People would say to me, “oh I never hear anything about this plan or that plan.” And I would think, “well, they do talk about that every day.” Far more often in print than in television those things would be explained, whether it was tax plan or health plan, but we didn’t always give the issues as much time. We are often accused of the horse race and that’s certainly a big element of it. That’s part of what people were excited about, who’s up, who’s down. So I think there are legitimate criticisms of how the media was handling this and I hope we will be collectively very willing to listen to those from both sides because I think we’ll end up getting better.

I think Adam, I’ve known Adam forever. I think you always bring all of your integrity to it. As an individual I certainly try my hardest to be fair. It’s the collective that sometimes gets a little haywire.

**Adam Nagourney:**

Especially in this environment.

**Sarah Simmons:**

I think that’s fair.

**Geoff Earle:**

I thought Obama had a pronounced advantage in the primary where Clinton, probably because of who she is, had been dealing with a very aggressive press corps. Every time she made a slight slip up or said something or shaded something differently people would go back and check it against her book she made five years ago and video images of her in Bosnia. She got run through the wringer. And Obama, he was such a phenomenon and he was a celebrity. The overwhelming narrative of Obama, this new guy that not everyone knew so well, “who is” he and “oh look he’s got 20 thousand people.”

**Steve Hildebrand:**

Yeah, but let’s be honest. How many times did every network and cable outlet play reverend Wright’s outrageous statement and basically say, “this guy is a friend of Barack Obama’s.” He is, that doesn’t mean that we own everything that he says. It played over and over and over again. Not just for a day, not just for a week, but for weeks at a time. It never went away.

**Christian Ferry:**

But associations were fair game on both sides.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

Associations are fair game but that doesn’t mean you should have to own every phrase that comes out of that association’s mouth.

**Christian Ferry:**

I think both sides owned every phrase that came out. Reverend Hagee is a good is a good example.

**Sarah Simmons:**

What about the millions of dollars in advertising that you spent attacking senior members of our campaign team for past work they’d done lobbying. I think Christian is right. Everybody had to own all of their alliances. That was the one negative story, Reverend Wright was the one negative story that got played and played and replayed. It was hard for us to get traction on some very legitimate stuff like the Rezco involvement with the Obama’s buying their home. I think some of the Aires stuff was very legitimate and it was very hard to get any sort of attention from the media on those stories. Legitimately difficult.

**Ed Rollins:**

Having worked for Richard Nixon, having worked for Ronald Reagan, having worked for Ross Perot, I’ve been in the trenches when media hasn’t always been used fairly. I think the difference in this campaign was that it was very long. Very exciting personalities were involved. You had a crippled president with no handoff. And there is so much more media today than there’s ever been before. I think the difficulties both campaigns had, part of our job when we run campaigns is to control the spin and try to tell our story and the media’s job is not to tell our story, but to tell what they feel is the

truth. I think there was such a barrage out there that there were days that the Obama campaign didn't get what they wanted and there were days the McCain campaign didn't get what they wanted. But I think overall, to give the condemnation that the media did not cover this campaign fairly, as someone who stepped back and watched it and as someone who is a part of CNN, it was biased sometimes, but I get to offset that. I think there was just a glut of information and interest. To make a generalization that the media was biased is not accurate.

**Christian Ferry:**

I think that, I give the Obama campaign credit on this, they did a very effective job of making John McCain own every single association, every single relationship. Everything that came out of the mouth of anyone who had been associated with John McCain. Phil Graham is a great example. I think we were less effective and whether or not the media played a role in that, their campaign...

**Geoff Earle:**

What about the reverend Wright point?

**Nate Silver:**

There's a lesson there. They didn't pounce on Reverend Wright and that got more coverage.

**Sarah Simmons:**

We didn't pounce on Reverend Wright because John McCain took a principled position that it was something he didn't want his campaign to be about. That is why. There would have been a vibrant debate within the campaign.

**Nate Silver:**

That got more attention and Hillary didn't really pounce on it either.

**Sarah Simmons:**

Believe me there were people in the campaign that thought we should really pour the gasoline on that fire.

**Christian Ferry:**

But trying to say that John McCain didn't take up the Reverend Wright issue as a Machiavellian ploy is absurd. He didn't take it up because he didn't think it was fair game and he didn't want to inject race into this campaign. By taking up Reverend Wright you were going to do that. Our campaign drew a line and said we're not going there.

## **Voting demographics, youth vote, African American vote**

**Jonathan Earle:**

Let's move on to where things ended up on election day because I want to talk to our numbers guys Joe and in some ways Nate. What groups made a difference on Election Day? I guess Election Day was really all of October and November 4<sup>th</sup>. We talk

a lot about the youth vote. We talk about African Americans. We talk about the people who said they were going to vote for Barack Obama and voted for Barack Obama rather than doing this Bradley Effect thing. I know you have some charts and some numbers.

**Joe Lenski:**

It's most of the groups that we've talked about. The youth vote was dramatic, it was two to one. No age group has ever voted that dramatically for a candidate in the general election. Although even if you take out the 18 to 29 year olds Obama would have had a couple point edge. It would have been a long night, not an 11 o'clock night, without the youth voter. We saw dramatic increases in African American and Hispanic voters both in their proportion of the electorate and in their margins for the Democrats. At the same time McCain held those over 65, and rural voters compared to Bush in '04. There were groups, base groups, that McCain held the line on. The changes were so dramatic among young voters and among Hispanics and African Americans.

You'll also see county by county numbers come out in suburban areas. What you were talking about earlier, if Sarah Palin's gains for the McCain campaign had held in September that would have been the area. But in many of the suburban counties in key states like Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana and Pennsylvania they didn't hold. Obama did phenomenally well in the Philadelphia suburbs, in Indianapolis and the northern Virginia suburbs. So that vote data matches what we saw in the exit poll there.

**Bill Lacy:**

Joe, yesterday Ray Strother pointed out a piece that Mark Mellman wrote earlier in the week where he said that Obama's gains were really among individuals that made \$200 thousand and up.

**Joe Lenski:**

Yeah, there was a dramatic increase. Now that is a small segment of the population, maybe getting smaller.

**Christian Ferry:**

They may have been that wealthy on election day but not any more.

**Joe Lenski:**

Yeah, we're talking about less than five percent of voters. You saw it in the exit polls but you also saw it in these high income suburbs. I saw it in New Jersey and Summerset County where I'm from. Obama didn't win those counties but he came a lot closer than Kerry did four years ago. The most dramatic increase in Pennsylvania for Obama was Lancaster County. Lancaster County typically votes 70-30 Republican. There were 25, 30 point changes on the margin in Lancaster County, a very high income part of the country. So, yes, it was obviously true, especially in the northeast and the west coast. High income suburbs went dramatically for Obama and we hadn't seen that for a Democratic Candidate before.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

There are two numbers that I think are under reported. The first one is the high percentage of first time voters turning out. Everyone in this room probably had a high level of skepticism as to whether or not these new registrants were actually going to show up. The second one is the high percentage of unmarried women who supported Barack Obama and became a pretty critical part of the base of how we won. I want to say it was 27 percent of our vote that came from unmarried women. I'm pretty sure that's the right number, at least in Greenberg Quinlan's analysis. That's a huge huge part of our vote that really hasn't been talked much about.

**Joe Lenski:**

Both unmarried women with children and unmarried women without children. We're talking 69-31 unmarried women without children voted for Obama.

**The future for Obama and the Republican Party**

**Bill Lacy:**

Okay, one last question then we'll open it up. I'd like to go around the table and get everyone's view. Christian, I'm going to pick on you and ask you to start. Very briefly, from each of you, the least three democratic Presidents have had major catastrophes. Can President Elect Obama avoid that and can the Republican Party come back from probably its lowest state since, probably not even Watergate, probably since the great depression.

**Christian Ferry:**

It is too early to say whether or not Barack Obama is going to have a successful Presidency or not. I think in his appointments, in his transition, thus far he has done a very fine job. I think he's put together a good team. He has not become president yet so it is yet to be seen how that team will work together, whether or not it will be successful. If I can step back from my Republican position and understand that we lost the election so they get to put people up with there set of principles and everything else, I look at the team that Barack Obama has put together and I say good job. I think they've really done well and frankly, as an American I wish them the best of luck and I hope they succeed because our country needs Barack Obama to be successful. As John McCain said on election night, he's John McCain's President and he's my President and I hope he does well. That said, I don't know if he's going to. We'll all be watching intently to see how it happens. I think he has the potential to be very successful. I think he has the potential to face some real struggles with his base, with the crisis that we face. It is a difficult time to be President of the United States and we'll see how he does.

**Bill Lacy:**

What about the future of the party, quickly.

**Christian Ferry:**

The future of the party. Parties ebb and flow. One party has success one year, the next year the other party comes back. Of course the Republican Party is going to be back.

We have been down before. The Democrats have been down before. I would say in 1994 you were sitting here scratching your heads wondering how the Democrats were ever going to get over the defeat. In 2000 George Bush won and in 2002 Republicans had great success and people were talking about a permanent Republican majority. That's gone, but we will be back. I have no doubt that we will be back because these things happen in cycles. We are still a party of ideas. Those ideas need to be fleshed out. They need to be relevant to Americans today. I think the Republican Party needs to do a little soul searching to figure out what it is we stand for and where we're going but I'm very confident that we'll do that.

**Bil Lacy:**

Let's all move quickly now.

**Sarah Simmons:**

Sure, I agree with what Christian says. Everyone on our team wishes Barack Obama the best. We face some very real challenges and I think that's one of the things about McCain's reaction to all this. He went straight back to Washington and he's traveling the world right now trying to address some of those things. That's what our country needs. One interesting thing that he might encounter is with so many young progressive people that were involved in his campaign, the appointment of standard bearers in the Democratic Party, politically it may pose a problem for him going forward.

On the Republican side, this is a cyclical business. I think this might be what our party needed in some sense. Washington taught our party some bad habits and we need to, from a party standpoint, go back and massage our message to a point where it makes sense to people, it is relevant. It isn't some guy that got elected in 1980 before half the people who voted were even born. It's retouching those messages so they make sense to people, and its developing a bench. Our talent pool is not that deep right now and that doesn't mean that the people involved aren't talented. It just means that it's not deep enough. A combination of qualified, skilled people is what we're going to need to move forward.

**Kelly O'Donnell:**

Well after the longest and most difficult campaign, the hard part is now. President Elect Obama will have to govern. Things will change. When you are the challenger candidate you can rail against the establishment. Now he will have to deliver on promises. The inauguration will certainly be a national event that will touch on many emotions. It will help to put the country behind him from all sides and he will probably have a honeymoon that may be longer than some presidents. It will be fascinating to watch and I'm sure an enormous challenge. He now has to answer the tough questions and deal with these incredibly difficult problems. He has to maneuver from being the candidate to now being that regular person in the office. Some of the magical qualities that he enjoyed during the campaign, just because time will go on, will be less noticed. Not that he won't still have those qualities, but they will be less talked about, less unexpected and it will be a challenge to simply make that transition. Certainly there are more reporters watching this presidency than in a long time. Those will be big challenges.

**Nate Silver:**

For Obama this is probably a very difficult time. I think there is probably a correlation between the kind of campaign someone runs and the kind of administration they'll run. That's a positive sign, but we'll just have to see. For the Republicans, the pendulum will most likely start to swing back. This is probably the worst point for them. What I would worry about for them is that it would only swing back to 49 percent, because if you're not winning Latinos and young voters, urban voters are a problem, even the suburbs to some extent, you might not have a 50 percent coalition at the Presidential level. They will probably have some gains back in the House, maybe not in the Senate based on what races are up in 2010. 2012 might be a good year for them in the Senate but getting a majority coalition is going to be harder now because of the demographics.

**Ed Rollins:**

Having listened to Steve and Matt give very impressive presentations the last two days, as great a candidate as he was, your campaign was even greater than I thought it was from afar. It shows we've got a long long way to catch up. Our campaign, and no offense to the jobs you did, was sort of state of the art 1996 and theirs was state of the art 2015. I think the Achilles heal of the Democrats and Barack Obama is that you've got some personalities there that are going to be hard to reign in. You've got some people there that aren't as appealing to the public. If we're going to watch Barney Frank, and Schumer and Nancy Pelosi and Reid, who haven't gotten high marks, it gives us an opportunity to come back in 2010 with some house races. Obviously we don't want your President to fail. He's our President. I think winning back the Presidency is a much longer term process.

**Joe Lenski:**

We're going to see an approach to governing that is completely different from the last eight years. Those things were very effective in the campaign. If those things are in the White House they should be effective. Who knows what types of problems are going to be thrown at the administration. In terms of the numbers, one of the numbers that hasn't been reported is that Obama won by seven points. The generic Democratic House vote over the Republicans was ten points. It was even larger. So there is an even deeper hole for the Republicans in Congress to dig out of in 2010. I don't think 2010 is enough time to dig out of that hole. The best gains Republicans can get in 2010 is in the Governor's races. It's not going to happen in the House and the Senate in two years.

**David Kurtz:**

You mentioned all the three previous Democratic Presidencies all being disasters, which is an interesting metric.

**Bill Lacy:**

I just said they all had major political disasters.

**David Kurtz:**

I just don't see much predicate historically from those three. Johnson had the unpopular war and Obama is against this war. Carter is probably the most similar in that

he was a real outsider to the process but the media environment and the campaign environment from 1970 to now is so dramatically different. Already you see him bringing in people that aren't the Georgia mafia types that Carter brought in. I don't see that immediately as being the issue. And certainly Clinton's problems are different from now. A thing that I would start by mentioning is that it makes it feel like 1980 for the Republicans in the sense of the Generational shift. Not just Obama himself, but the average age of the delegates and the people at the Republican convention, it felt like an AARP gathering. Whereas the people who were in Denver and involved in the functioning of the party, and I don't mean that to be insulting, its just substantially different. The numbers in the vote that Joe was showing us are going to contribute to some long term stability for the Democrats like what the Republicans enjoyed in 1980 and the Republicans are not going to enjoy that now. That is not to say, Clinton got elected in that period, and certainly the Republicans will see successes but I do think we've hit a sea change moment generationally.

**Geoff Earle:**

I spent a lot of years covering the Senate, so I'll talk about that. I'll quote Will Ayres and say I wish I knew Obama better in that I don't know when he has to make a decision about whether we do universal healthcare this year or whether we do a trillion dollar stimulus package versus a half a trillion dollar stimulus package. Who do we bring on board to get a coalition to pass this? I have no evidence what he's going to do on those key decisions. But what we do know is that he's brought in some very sharp, experienced people. He ran a great campaign. He beat the two best names in American politics, so he's got a ton of potential. Hopefully he'll avoid any disasters. So I guess we will have to see.

**Adam Nagourney:**

I think we're in this incredibly unusual period right now. I don't think we've been in a period like this since the 30s with the economy and war so it's really hard to tell what Obama is going to do. I do think, and you guys sort of reinforced this for me, I do think a lot of people are pulling for him just out of a sense of patriotism. I think Kelly's point from before, that he is going to have a longer honeymoon, I do think that is true. And I do think that it's not just because of Obama but because people are really alarmed about what is going on. That goes to his benefit. If he succeeds at this, if he gets us out of this economic crisis, if he actually resolves this situation with the world then I think the Republicans are going to have a hard time. Karl Rove used to talk about the Republican realignment, you could see that resulting in a Democratic dominance for a long long time.

On the Republican side, you guys are right, it's cyclical. In four, eight years you guys are going to be back in some sense but I do not see who the clear next leaders of the Republican Party are. If we were having this conference four years ago we would have talked about Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, we might have talked about John Edwards, whatever. I'm not sure there are many clear future leaders for the Republican Party. If I was a Republican that would be something that I would be thinking about and working on right now.

**Matt Rodriguez:**

I don't think there's much to say about Barack that hasn't been said. His work is what we've all talked about. What happens during a Presidency is invariably the unknown. We don't know how he'll react to the unknown. Bush had 9/11 but we don't really know and it's kind of an impossible thing to answer. He's been pretty calm in the face of a lot of storms and that's a good character trait as President but beyond that it's hard to say.

The last thing the Republican Party wants to hear is our advice. I think the one thing though...

**Bill Lacy:**

You may be surprised.

**Matt Rodriguez:**

But I do think that they've got big problems in the northeast and the southwest with the demographic issues. One of the things that they've gotten away from, at least in my feeling and you saw it with your candidate, is Reagan in 1980. There were a lot of ideas floating around in the 1970s and an incubator of ideas. Buckley, people like that with the supply side economics and welfare and that kind of stuff that culminated with Reagan. I think they've gotten away from that. The campaign felt very stale in terms of ideas and "spread the wealth." There are a lot of people for whom that isn't even relative to their lives. That's a long time ago for a lot of the electorate. Whether it's the religious right, the moderates, the fiscal conservatives, I don't know where it should go but they don't feel like they have a lot of new ideas. It isn't very fresh and that's a problem for a party. I don't necessarily agree with those ideas but I do think there is an ideas phase that they need to go through over the course of time and I do think that's where they're going to need to go.

**Steve Hildebrand:**

Six quick points. One, expectations are incredibly high. Two, the problems in this country are larger and more numerous at the beginning of his Presidency than we've probably seen in several generations. Three, this will be a true test as to whether or not the people outside of Washington are going to have a stronger voice than the people inside of Washington. The special interest groups, the Political Action Committees, the lobbyist on K Street, who's going to have more influence with the White House? Who's going to have more influence with the members of the House and Senate? If we do this right it will be the people of America who have a larger voice in setting the Agenda for this country. Number four, I think there's a real question as to whether or not he is going to be able to deliver. My hope is that he is going to be able to deliver things that matter for the people who voted for him. What is he going to do for young people and their future? What's he going to do for unmarried women? What's he going to do for Hispanics, African Americans, the coalition that got him elected? Number five, one thing that we heard in our first focus group and that never ever went away was an incredible feeling that was widespread, whether we can regain our position in the world. And if Barack Obama is successful in that front alone the people of this country are going to feel better about themselves. The last thing I'm going to say is more of a question because I

haven't actually seen it. I guess in last week's Time Magazine there was an article about life expectancy of typical Republican voters as opposed to typical Democratic voters and I don't know if anybody has seen that or not, but it favored the Democrats. Not that I wish anybody to die.

**Ed Rollins:**

I promise that I'm going to live to see another Republican President.

**Bill Lacy:**

On that scary thought, I want to apologize, we are out of time. We are not going to be able to do Q and A but it is very important to get our panelist to their planes on time. I don't want anybody missing their flights.

2008 was an extraordinarily historic election. We've had some extraordinary insights over the past two days. I want to thank the panelist for your time and for coming to the Dole Institute at the University of Kansas. We could not have had a better group and we're most appreciative to you.