

Aurora Forum at Stanford University
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NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Jonathan Alter
Dan Schnur
David Demarest (moderator)

Cosponsored with Stanford Publishing Courses

Annenberg Auditorium

Holly Brady: Good evening, everyone, and welcome. My name is Holly Brady, and I'm the director of Stanford Publishing Courses, a division of Stanford University that offers executive education courses for professionals working in the magazine and book-publishing industry. Tonight's public conversation with three experts in political campaign messaging is co-sponsored by Stanford Publishing Courses and the Aurora Forum. This is the third consecutive year that we have partnered with the Aurora Forum to present what has come to be known as the *Newsweek* Evening. It's a special conversation about media and politics made possible by an endowment in honor of the late Maynard Parker, Stanford alumnus and former *Newsweek* editor. Maynard was a longtime supporter of Stanford Publishing Courses, where he spoke to media professionals on a regular basis.

The director of the Aurora Forum, Mark Gonnerman, cannot be here tonight, but he wants you to know that the audio, video, and transcript versions of this conversation will soon be posted on the Aurora Forum Web site, auroraforum.org.

Tonight we will follow the standard format of approximately 45 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of conversation inspired by your questions and comments. If, when we get to that point in the evening, you have a contribution to make, please line up behind the microphones in the aisles.

We have university vice president David Demarest with us as our moderator this evening, and he will be introducing our guests, but let me introduce him first. On his way to Stanford, where he arrived in 2005, he served four years as a member of the White House senior staff for President George H. W. Bush. As White House communications director, he worked directly with the president, the White House Chief of Staff, and the Cabinet, overseeing a broad range of White House communications activities, including presidential speechwriting, media relations, and intergovernmental affairs. Here at Stanford, he is the Vice President of Public Affairs, overseeing the university's relationships with the government, the community, and the media. I'm going to leave it

to David to introduce our off-campus guests. Please join me in welcoming them all to the Aurora Forum. [Applause]

David Demarest: Let me add my welcome. I'm delighted to be your moderator tonight. I am joined on the stage by *Newsweek* senior editor and columnist Jonathan Alter, and Republican media and political strategist Dan Schnur. I'll introduce each of them in a little bit more detail a little bit later. As you heard, our program will follow the usual format that has been the hallmark of Stanford University's Aurora Forum. We'll do a bit of scene setting up here with a discussion that will follow, and after that I'll open it up for questions from the audience. As you can see, we all got our outfits coordinated for this evening.

So, just to get us into the mood for tonight, because we're going to be talking about media and politics, we thought we'd just air a video that has gotten some notoriety.

Video is shown [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3G-IMZxjo> :

In a mashup from the 1984 Apple Superbowl ad, prisoners march into a movie theatre. A female athlete carrying a baton runs down the aisle, chased by soldiers in riot gear. Hillary Clinton is shown on the movie screen saying, "I intend to keep telling you exactly where I stand on all the issues. I'm looking at how to help you and other people who are hardworking like you, and I've really been impressed by how serious people are, because we all need to be part of the discussion. We're all going to be part of the solution. I don't want people who already agree with me; I want honest, experienced, hardworking, patriotic people who want to be part of a team—the American team. I hope you've learned a little bit more about what I'm believing and trying to do and really help this conversation about our country get started." The female athlete throws her baton at the screen, which explodes. The ad ends with the words, "On January 14th, the Democratic primary will begin. And you'll see why 2008 won't be like 1984." It concludes with the words "BarackObama.com."]

Demarest: So, get you in the mood?

To kick things off, I'd like to talk a little bit about history. If you think back over the last fifty years, politicians have been trying to use emerging technologies to further their own objectives, to communicate with various publics, and to make an impression in ways that prior to those technologies being in vogue they were unable to do. If you go all the way back to FDR with the Fireside Chats, that was the first time that radio was really used to bring the presidency and the president into the homes of everyday Americans. Prior to that, how did they relate to the president? Probably through the occasional newspaper article, but here they were hearing the voice of the president, in some cases for the very first time.

If you fast-forward to 1952, there was a vice presidential candidate named Richard Nixon who was trying to save his spot on the Republican ticket, and in a very unusual moment, he decided that he would go on the public airwaves on TV, then a brand-new medium,

and talk to the American people and defend himself against some of the accusations that had been made about him. Eisenhower was ready to drop him from the ticket, and Nixon did what has become known as the “Checkers Speech.” Checkers was the name of the dog that was given to his children, and at the end of his little story about getting this dog as a gift, he said, “No matter what they say about me, we’re going to keep him.”
[Laughter]

What people don’t realize is that the intelligentsia and the media panned that speech—said it was maudlin, manipulative—but at the end of that speech, parts of the speech that weren’t really well-known in today’s culture, he had delivered a broadside against the Democrats and Communism that inspired people to write and wire to the Republican National Committee asking that he stay on the ticket. Those telegrams ran 300,000 to 1,000 for him to stay on the ticket, and it left Eisenhower no choice but to keep him on the ticket.

You go to 1960: the Kennedy-Nixon debate—the first time that kind of dialogue, that kind of conversation, took place in front of the American people. And just as Nixon saved his position on the ticket in 1952 through television, some could argue that he lost it on television in 1960. Many historians say that if you listen to the Nixon-Kennedy debate on the radio, you’ll think Nixon won; if you see them on TV, you’ll think Kennedy won. And everyone remembers the five o’clock shadow that Nixon wore, and it was in comparison to the young and vibrant Kennedy, and many people attribute that to Nixon’s narrow loss in 1960.

There weren’t going to be debates again until 1976 between Ford and Carter. At that time, it was a tight race, and some would say that Gerald Ford lost the election because of an awkward and puzzling answer about Poland. I was managing a congressional race that year, and we lost by one percent, and I always thank Gerald Ford for that.

In 1988, two of the most famous images from that campaign included a phrase by George Herbert Walker Bush (my colleague, Dan Schnur, whispered to me that I will be emphasizing for the rest of my life the “H.W.,” and he may be right). It was the famous phrase “Read my lips: No new taxes” that he said about a thousand times, but first at the convention in 1988. That image was a popular cultural reference that captured the essence of his commitment not to raise taxes.

The other image that is quite memorable from that ’88 campaign was one of the Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis having an ill-advised ride in a tank. People like Dan and myself took every opportunity to share with as many people as we could that image of Michael Dukakis in the tank. Why? Because he was trying to burnish his image as being strong on defense, but it became a caricature, and many of the pundits talked about the look of Michael Dukakis in the tank as being more like the *Peanuts* cartoon-strip character, Snoopy.

Now, if you look at that “Read my lips” issue, that same issue came back to haunt the first President Bush and was one reason among many others that he was not reelected.

Speaking of 1992, which was the year that the senior Bush lost to Bill Clinton, for all of the smart, techie things that we did in the Bush campaign of '88, the tables were turned on us in 1992. And if you look, you'll see how Bill Clinton's campaign took message management to a new level and had campaign discipline that we did not have in 1992, and how their use of new communications platforms like TV talk shows and MTV communicated to an electorate the impression that George Herbert Walker Bush was out of touch and ultimately out of office.

So let's fast-forward to today. I would argue that the difference between today's political media environment and that of 1992 is probably as bad as the political media environment from 1992 back thirty or forty years. The transformation just in these last fifteen years has been extraordinary, and it is hard to believe that in just fifteen years so many things have happened in terms of media and technology. The Internet touches virtually everyone's life; everyone can be an author, everyone can be in the audience, cell phones are on everyone's belts along with their Blackberrys and their iPods, and maybe some of those are being replaced with iPhones, but the convergence of technology has been really extraordinary. And when it comes to politics, one-third of all Americans either read or share campaign news on-line, and this may surprise you, but three-quarters of them are over thirty. Senator Obama's site had 650,000 visitors just this past April; Senator Clinton had 500,000, and it is a brave new technological landscape indeed. And how the politics of 2008 will unfold across this landscape or because of this landscape is our subject tonight, and I couldn't be more delighted to have the two guests that we have tonight.

I'm going to introduce first Jonathan. Jonathan has been with *Newsweek* since '83 and has been senior editor and columnist since '97, and in the '80s he was *Newsweek's* media critic. He has covered six presidential campaigns, authored more than fifty *Newsweek* cover stories, and he is the author of *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*. He has received awards too numerous to mention, so I won't try. And he's no stranger to academia: a Harvard graduate and Visiting Professor of Press and Politics at Princeton in the '90s, I believe. So it is my pleasure to offer up the stage to Jonathan to have a few opening remarks. [Applause]

Jonathan Alter: Thanks, David. I think you teed it up really well. I just wanted to emphasize something that may have escaped people's attention, which is that, as Holly mentioned, this evening is really in honor of one of my mentors and my longtime boss, who was the editor-in-chief of *Newsweek* for many years, Maynard Parker, who was very involved with Stanford activities, so I just want to make sure that everybody gets that. Maynard's most famous line within *Newsweek*—and it became pretty well known throughout print journalism, at least—was that when there was a big story, Maynard, who had covered the war in Vietnam, would say, "We've got to scramble the jets." It's a military term for when you're sending up some fighter aircraft to engage in hostilities, and what he meant by that was we had to be on this story really fast. But in those days, when Maynard was running the magazine, that meant we've got to get a lot of reporting mobilized so that a week from now, or four or five days from now when *Newsweek* came out, we would be on top of the story. And if Maynard were alive today, it would be

“We’re going to scramble the jets the way they do in the military,” so within an hour we have something up on our Web site that is responding to this breaking news or providing some context or otherwise covering it.

So the big change with the technology is that the time horizons, both for the media and for the politicians, have shrunk and shrunk and shrunk and everything now is instantaneous. What any of us are saying right now could easily be (as David was talking about) or has probably already been blogged by somebody who’s in the audience. So that creates its own reality that changes the playing field. And the great innovation of the Clinton campaign in 1992, which I covered, and I think it was harmful for you guys was the war room—James Carville’s war room. “Rapid response,” they call it. You’ve got to be on something in the next news cycle. But in those days, despite the president of MTV getting involved in the campaign (and I was working part-time as a consultant for MTV that year on those town meetings and interviews that they were doing with the candidates), but still the spine of the campaign was the evening news. And it all played out not as paid television advertising as it does in a senatorial or gubernatorial campaign, but in a presidential campaign the evening news was the organizing principle for the campaign, and that has been obliterated. That is no longer the way these campaigns operate. They have to be all over the battle field. They can’t just fight along one front on the evening news anymore, and it requires a tremendous level of creativity in the different campaigns just to think about how they can best exploit the new opportunities of the new media and also a recognition that they’ve essentially lost control of the process and that user-generated content, like we saw with that Obama ad (that the Obama campaign had nothing to do with) has really changed the game. I think it’s great that there’s less control by both the mainstream media and by the campaigns. It’s good for democracy when those old hierarchies break down. Over the course of the evening, we can get into some of the disadvantages of it for the process, which are also considerable, but I think we should start out by acknowledging that overall it’s a good thing, especially on the fundraising end. Whatever one thinks of Obama, the fact that he raised over \$30 million from 250,000 different contributors is really good for democracy.

Demarest: Now I’m going to turn to Dan. Dan Schnur is one of California’s leading political and media strategists. He worked on four presidential campaigns, three gubernatorial campaigns (in 1988, we were colleagues in the Bush campaign), and five years as chief spokesman for California Governor Pete Wilson. He was John McCain’s communications director in the 2000 race. If you are a Californian, which many of you are, you also hear him on KGO and KSFO doing political commentary or read him in the *L.A. Times*, the *Sacramento Bee*, or the *San Francisco Chronicle* on the op-ed page. Also no stranger to university life, Dan teaches both at the University of Southern California and at a small—I think it’s a community college up the road here—Cal? Something like that. [Laughter] Dan is a graduate of American University and a good friend. Over to you. [Applause]

Dan Schnur: First of all, David, I want to thank you for that very gracious introduction. It may not have sounded like that much to many of you, but as a Republican who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, that’s the nicest thing anyone has said about me

on a college campus in quite a while, so I appreciate it. [Laughter] I also appreciate the reference to the McCain 2000 campaign. Something tells me I'll be emphasizing 2000 the same way you emphasize "H.W." when you talk about your former employment.

I also want to thank all of you for not only having me here tonight but also having me back. I had the great privilege of talking to this gathering three years ago, and as Jonathan can attest, particularly as the campaign season heats up, people like us—and we can define that term a little bit later—get invited to talk to a great deal of these types of gatherings. But speaking at least for myself, I very rarely get invited back a second time. [Laughter] So it's very, very nice of you and gracious of you and optimistic and hopeful of you to have me back here again.

I'm going to take the liberty in my opening remarks to rename tonight's discussion because I don't think it's appropriate to talk about new media campaigning because as my students at both Cal and at USC point out to me, this is not new media. I don't think it's appropriate to talk about on-line campaigning any more than we now talk about television campaigning. Maybe in the days of the "Checkers Speech," in the days of the Kennedy-Nixon debate, it was appropriate to talk about campaigning on television, but over the last generation or two, television campaigning and campaigning have become synonymous, and new media campaigning and campaigning, I think, have become equally synonymous in this great new political world. And so I suggest to you instead that we talk about tonight rather the future of campaigning or, if you will, the "iPodization" of American politics.

I'm going to back up just a half-step here to tell you about a family member of mine, my cousin Phoebe, who is eleven years old. This Friday I'm flying to Minneapolis, Minnesota, because Phoebe is the only girl playing in her Little League All-Star team, and I promised I would come and watch her play. Let me tell you about Phoebe for a second. Phoebe's favorite television program—and for those of you who are parents of young girls or young boys in the audience, you'll recognize these names; the rest of you will have to take my word for it—her favorite TV shows are *Hannah Montana* and *Kim Possible*. We were talking on the phone recently and we were talking about my visit, and I asked her when her favorite television shows were on. She didn't know what I was talking about. [Laughter] She's a smart girl; she gets A's in school. These are her two shows; she's only allowed two television programs, per her parents. And I said, "Well, are they on before dinner or are they on after dinner? Are they on Saturday? Are they on Sunday?" She said, "Well, yes." [Laughter] Because just as I've never lived in a world without television, she has never lived—or at least has not been aware of living—in a world without YouTube. *Kim Possible* and *Hannah Montana* are on television whenever she wants them to be, so seven years from now, when she votes for the first time, she's going to look at the way candidates and campaigns communicate with her in an entirely different way than all of us do.

And my students both at Cal and at USC who are of voting age do the same thing. They watch TV on their own terms. Unlike us growing up who had five buttons on our car radio, they listen to music on their own terms. Unlike those of us growing up who waited

for our little brothers or sisters to get off the phone so we could use it, they e-mail and they IM on their own terms. They're not used to being part of a disempowered audience. They are used to being part of the conversation. And just as they are empowered when it comes to television, when it comes to music, when it comes to interpersonal communication, they expect that same array of options and that same degree of power when it comes to politics.

So the great thing about the "iPodization" of politics is that it empowers the audience and it therefore encourages potential audience members to participate. You don't have to wait for the candidate to give a speech. You can go on-line, you can go to a blog, you can send an e-mail, you can call a talk radio show. There are all sorts of ways to become part of the conversation, and that is empowering, that is terrific. And that is the kind of thing that we have seen in the past with Obama and before that with Howard Dean and before that with John McCain—candidates savvy enough to use what old people call "new media" in order to empower and engage an audience.

But there's a downside as well, which I'll mention briefly and which I hope we'll have a chance to talk about more later: as empowering as this media can be, it's also isolating. What I worry about is that when we have an array of not just three news programs at six-thirty at night and not just five radio stations on our car radios, but when we have 800 cable TV shows, when we have an infinite number of radio stations and an even ... is there something larger than infinite? ... a larger than infinite number of Web sites, blogs, and e-mail correspondence opportunities, it becomes much, much easier for us to pick and choose who we talk to, what we talk about, and what we hear. When I was growing up, my father, who is an otherwise reasonable man but an ardent Democrat [Laughter] (my father voted for Howard Dean even though he thought he was too conservative).... My father and I would watch the evening news together, and when the news ended, we would have come to radically different impressions about what we had seen, but at least we'd be drinking from the same information pool. If my dad's watching Bill Mahr and I'm listening to Rush Limbaugh, if he's at the Daily Kos and I'm at Townhall, if he's listening to NPR and I'm watching Fox, not only are we coming to different conclusions about the news of the day but we're drinking from entirely different pools of information and experiencing entirely different realities. Now, to me, the empowering aspects of the "iPodization" of American politics far outweigh the potential for polarization, and I think there absolutely is a great future that comes from the generations that follow ours, and we'll talk about those in just a minute. But I think as we move forward through this conversation, it's worth realizing that we're not talking about new media campaigning and we're not talking about on-line campaigning; we're not talking about video or YouTube campaigning; we're talking about campaigning. And someday people like us, but younger, are going to look back at that Hillary video or its yet-to-be-produced successor the same way Dave and Jonathan and I look back at the "Checkers Speech" or the Kennedy-Nixon debate. So to take this out of the context of the Internet and outside of the context of YouTube and, I think, to put it inside of a broader societal conversation is the best that we can do as we move the conversation forward. [Applause]

Demarest: Terrific. You know, there's a name for the system that you describe, where you can be isolated from anything that you don't want to really listen to, and it's called the Daily Me. It's all about me, and people can decide what kind of information they want to hear. They want to do exactly as Dan was talking about, and that has tremendous implications for the world in which you live in the media business. So I'm going to start with Jonathan tonight to get this conversation going.

You were schooled in a world which is now kind of referred to as traditional media. And you're now working at the center of a totally changed and evolving and transforming media environment. Reportedly, Bill Clinton once said of you, and I quote, "Alter bites me in the ass sometimes, but at least he knows what we're trying to do." Presumably, you knew what he was trying to do because you did the hard work of reporting: you followed leads, you found sources, you did your homework on the issues, you got access to key figures, including the president. Is that kind of reporting being eclipsed by the Drudge Report, the new digital platforms, or bypassed by the candidates as they try to not allow reporters to intermedicate their message to voters by working with reporters?

Alter: Well, some of it is a function of who is in office at a particular time. I met Bill Clinton in 1984 and I interviewed him at least two or three times a year every year he was president, and I haven't interviewed George W. Bush since the 2000 campaign. And the *New York Times* went five years without anybody from that newspaper interviewing the current President Bush. So some of these just relate to sort of the polarization of the press and are not strictly related to technology. But I think just to pick up on Dan's point, for all the advantages and democratization ... and I don't want to say that as kind of an offhand comment—I think it's profoundly important that people can participate and have access in ways that they didn't in the past—a lot of times people on blogs will have much better insights than I could have. I believe in the wisdom of crowds and that if you have a lot more people participating, you're going to get new insights into things. But I do think we have what Dan was referring to and what I call the politics of validation, in that people go to sources of information that validate what they already believe rather than challenging what they believe and provoking them to think and act anew, as Abraham Lincoln said. And it's much more comfortable to just go to Daily Kos if you're a liberal, or Townhall if you're a conservative than it is to be looking around and sampling a lot of different ideas. So I think that's a troublesome trend.

The definition of good journalism that I believe in that A. J. Liebling talked about was that it is our job to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. But the problem is that if the comfortable are not listening to you because you're not agreeing with them or comforting them, you get a different sort of journalism where you afflict the already afflicted and you comfort the already comfortable. And that's also driven by market forces because if you're saying things that are uncomfortable for your audience—if you're provoking them—they might not buy your product. So when we move from an era of the Hearsts and the McCormicks that really started here in San Francisco with Hearst, where media barons who were trying to get their ideas across and didn't care so much about the bottom line and any particular product were replaced by corporate ownership, where it's all about the bottom line, it becomes much harder to do potentially

unpopular journalism. And the bigger problem economically—and this is really troublesome—is that the model, the foundation of media is advertising and circulation. And when circulation is just obliterated by the Internet, because it becomes almost like a meaningless concept, and advertising is growing rapidly on the Internet, but from such a small basis that old media is going to die before new media can support what it needs to, you get in a situation where the seed corn—the basis—of all of what people chew over is reporting. If you're going to comment on things on a blog, you've got to have the basic reporting. And the problem in a nutshell is that talk is cheap and reporting is expensive. So it's real cheap to just sit in your p.j.'s and blog and re-chew something that somebody has dug up. It's real expensive to have a bad debt bureau, or, in political terms, to send somebody out on a campaign plane where they're charging you through the nose thousands of dollars a day. What you end up getting is less reporting and more commentary, and I'm all for commentary because I'm a columnist, but at a certain point, I feel like we're drowning in people's opinions, and just to quote the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts." [Laughter, Applause] And we're getting fewer and fewer facts, and facts are becoming ... rather than stubborn things, they're becoming relative things. People have their own facts. There's this great line that Ron Suskind got out of an anonymous source at the Bush White House, where he said that he was sounding very disparaging about people like me and Ron and the old mainstream media, and he said, "You're in the reality-based community." [Laughter]

Schnur: I agree with everything that Jon just said. What I thought might be helpful is to look at that same dynamic from the perspective of the campaign as opposed to from the perspective of the media. In my world there are three kinds of people: there are saints, there are sinners, and there are salvageables. I'll take a moment to define my terms: saints, sinners, and salvageables. A saint is somebody who agrees with me no matter what, under any circumstances. [Laughter] And politically speaking, at least, roughly 40 percent of the electorate here in California and nationally are saints; they are going to vote for my party's candidate unless we try really, really hard to get them not to. Consequently, 40 percent of the voters, California and nationally, in my eyes are sinners—otherwise good people. My father, who I told you about, is a sinner. My younger brother, who otherwise is a bright young man who worked seven years in the Clinton-Gore administration, is a sinner. My aunts, my uncles, my 89-year-old grandmother...

Alter: What happened to you, Dan? [Laughter] There's a pattern here.

Schnur: They're wonderful people, but no matter how hard I tried—no matter how much time I spent or oxygen I wasted—I would never, ever, ever be able to convince any of them to vote for a candidate of my choosing. And, of course, it's all subjective because in my dad's eyes, my friends and I are the sinners and he and his friends are the saints. And you can draw your own conclusions from that. Twenty percent of the electorate, therefore, are salvageables, and the difference between getting 40 percent of the vote and getting 51 percent of the vote and getting elected is attracting the majority of those salvageables—those swing voters—those soccer moms and those NASCAR dads.

Now, there are two ways to win an election. Number one is the persuasion model—the idea that I figure out a way to get the majority of those salvageables to vote for my candidate. The other model, rather than the persuasion model, is the motivational model, the idea being that rather than trying to persuade undecided voters to vote for my candidate, I assume that they're not that interested and most of them probably aren't going to vote anyway. Instead, I do everything I can to motivate and inspire my saints to turn out in as great numbers as possible. Jon, for the purposes of this discussion, and this discussion only, do you mind being a Republican saint, just for a second?

Alter: Isn't that a contradiction in terms? [Laughter, Applause]

Schnur: This is what I get at Thanksgiving every year. [Laughter]

Jon's a saint and my friend David here—fifteen years safely removed from Washington—is a salvageable. If I want to convince Dave Demarest, the salvageable voter, to support my candidate, I have to convince him to do two things. Number one, I have to convince him to vote, and number two, I have to convince him to vote for me or for my candidate. So there are two separate actions. Now, if I only do one of them—if I only get him to vote but can't close the deal—then not only have I wasted my time but I've gained my opponent a vote. With saintly Jonathan Alter here.... Don't wince like that. [Laughter] With saintly Jonathan Alter, I only have to convince him of one thing: I only have to convince him to vote because I know if he does vote he's going to vote for me.

And what we've seen in both parties over the last decade, largely because of the kind of dynamics that Jon has been talking about, it has become not only more cost efficient to motivate saints rather than to persuade salvageables, it's become much, much more convenient given the various forms of media that we're talking about. It used to be that if I didn't like what the *San Francisco Chronicle* was writing, I didn't have much choice. It was like complaining about the referees or the umpires; it was must there. Now I can go to the blogs. I can go to the talk shows. I can go to the e-mail trees. And I can communicate with my supporters—with my saints—ignoring the *Chronicle* or the *L.A. Times* or *The Washington Post*.

Now, there's a point at which this breaks down, and I think we've seen that with the Bush administration over the last twelve to eighteen months, where you demand so much more and more and more of your saints that you begin to drive them off into the other direction. But the trend that we have seen in both parties over the last decade, largely because of this technology and these dynamics, from Al Gore to Howard Dean, certainly through the Bush and the Rove campaigns of 2000 and 2004, is a premium on motivating your most loyal supporters at the exclusion of talking to the vast middle of American politics. And it helps you get elected.... (I'm sorry, Jon, I'm almost done, you saint, you.) It's more cost efficient and the technology certainly exists to make it easier in terms of getting elected. The danger is once you're there, how do you govern? How do you talk to the other side when you've been ignoring them for an entire campaign? How

do you convince salvageables to support you on the issue of your choice when you didn't spend time building a base of support during the election?

Demarest: What if you're not just ignoring them but you're demonizing them?

Schnur: Even worse. You can't come to them the day after and say, "Hey, you know what? I was just kidding. Let's work together to reform Social Security now that we're all friends again." It doesn't work that way.

Alter: Actually, I think you're half right, but I feel like Karl Rove did that. I don't believe that Bill Clinton, who believed in the politics of triangulation and was not playing to the traditional Democratic Party base—he didn't do it, Al Gore didn't do it. It's done by Democratic primary candidates sometimes because they know that the primary voters are more liberal so they play to the base a little bit in primaries. But, in general elections and in governing, this has been Karl Rove's unique and evil contribution to American politics. And it *is* evil, and I use that word intentionally, and the reason it's evil is because it says that his president is only president of some of the people, not all of the people. "Base strategy," it was called, that Rove pioneered, and for several years it went brilliantly. He was very successful politically in getting his man reelected. But it was profoundly destructive to this country, where we had the closest election in American history, unless you count 1876. Instead of taking the message from the people, which was that we needed to govern from the center and work together—we had some big problems, especially after September 11—and to then say, "No, I'm going to implement this base strategy where I only govern for the 40 percent that we talked about—maybe 51 percent—just over the edge with the persuadables, and to hell with everybody else," is really destructive. And that was not done by Democrats, so this even-Steven thing I don't buy.

Schnur: I agree. I halfway agree with you. I agree with you that it is a very, very damaging thing to our democracy, but I would argue strongly, and I was not invited here as a partisan nor do I intend to perform as one, that it is evil, but it is bipartisan. And the vitriol that comes from the left from the Daily Koses and the moveon.orgs is just as angry and just as nasty as what comes from the right.

Alter: I agree with that, Dan. But President Clinton, say, to use the most recent Democratic president, was not reflecting Daily Kos. President Bush *was* reflecting Rush Limbaugh. So, yes, you're going to have extremes in American politics; you always have had them and you always will have them. It's whether the president is a big enough man or woman to govern for all the people and to bridge those gaps and bring people together and build consensus. That's the only way you can succeed to solve problems.

Schnur: I would agree with you about Clinton and I will note just for a moment the speed with which the Democratic Party raced back to the left after he left the Oval Office. But I would say this, to stick to my point: The only difference between the Karl Rove approach and the Howard Dean approach was not one of vitriol or anger; rather, it was one of effectiveness. But both sides do it, and in order to address this problem, I think

it's important to recognize that the leaders and the operatives and the candidates of both parties spend way too much time fanning the flames of their most loyal supporters and not enough time looking for that common ground. You're right that it's damaging. I think it's dangerous to attribute it all to one side of the aisle or the other.

Demarest: Let's talk about whether this new media environment contributes to that. Let's talk about the politics of destruction: how negative blogs, how anonymous postings, those kinds of issues, are to the detriment of civil discourse.

Alter: It doesn't bother me, actually. When I read the book about Franklin Roosevelt and the kinds of things that were said by his opponents and the kinds of things that were said in the election of 1800, where Jefferson was running and in real time, during the campaign: "Candidate Jefferson fathered a child with a slave." This was going on then. They called them pamphlets instead of blogs, but Tom Paine was the first blogger. So this is not a new thing in American politics. I don't think it's a bad thing. It's a contact sport. The question is what you do when you get there. And this is where I think in some ways we're talking past each other. I agree that Democrats can be very rough in a campaign. It's what you do when you get there—when you've been elected—and how you choose to view your obligations to the country. So I don't worry too much about that.

I actually think that we're going to see a relatively clean campaign this time from the candidates. People always say that is just gets dirtier and dirtier every year. I think you're going to see it get cleaner this year because the blogs and the user-generated content—the YouTube-type stuff—can carry a lot of the load of the really sharp-elbowed attacks. You've now got the "527"s, the independent committees, which have been revalidated by this recent Supreme Court decision, so you're going to see independent expenditures—really rough, nasty stuff. But the candidates themselves are going to be able to stay out of it.

It used to be that if you wanted to run a negative ad, you kind of had your fingerprints on it to a certain extent. When you guys ran the ad of Dukakis in the tank, you had to run that ad. Now the problem with the Willie Horton ad—that was sort of the beginning of where maybe you could do it without your fingerprints on it, and I think that was the first really important independent commercial.

Demarest: That was the first independent commercial that highlighted this issue.

Alter: I guess you could say that the public doesn't distinguish between who paid for it, and they just see a lot of mud flying. People who are turned off by that I think need to just have a little bit more historical perspective. There are votes in staying clean because the disgust with this kind of politics is so high that it costs you if you go after somebody. So one of the things that goes on in these primaries is when there's a frontrunner, nobody wants to be the candidate who takes out the frontrunner because if you take out the frontrunner, you can't win yourself. Somebody else comes up. So right now, you have Obama and Edwards going, "Who's going to take out Hillary? Not me," they hope,

because if they can avoid doing it then maybe they can benefit, because you always pay a price by going negative.

Schnur: Jon's right. The messaging is the same. Was it Grover Cleveland who was accused of having an illegitimate child? "Ma, ma where's my pa? Off to the White House, ha, ha, ha." [Laughter] The difference is communicating that via pamphlet and communicating that via blog is speed, so the message is the same but the speed with which that message disseminates is much more extreme. You've heard the old expression, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth puts its shoes on." Well, in the Internet age, that is probably an understatement.

I make a couple of quick points. Number one, what this does is it puts more responsibility on the news consumer; it puts more responsibility on the voter to differentiate—to distinguish—between what they believe to be credible and noncredible information. And the "iPodization" I was talking about earlier works against that because if you only go to your own favorite Web site with somebody who agrees with you and tells you how smart you are seven days a week, you're not going to get a very broad perspective of the charge being made against your candidate or the opponent. Rather, it becomes the responsibility of the news audience to seek out a variety of sources across ideological lines to decide for themselves whether the charge is critical or not. But to me (and again, Jon's right: negative campaigning has always been there and personal attacks will always be part of the process, like it or not)... To me, the most important part of that exchange, though, is not the insult, it's not the criticism, it's not the attack; it's the response. How does the man or the woman respond to criticism? How do they respond or not respond to an attack? How do they take a punch? And what you learn about that individual, that man or woman on the campaign trail—how they handle adversity, how they handle unexpected circumstances—tells you a great deal about how they might conduct themselves once elected to office. Former Senator George Allen is a former senator now not just because of gaffes he made, some of which we may watch later, but because of the way he responded to them. Senator Obama and former Governor Romney are the respective frontrunners in at least some of the early primary states in their parties, even having had pretty nasty accusations leveled against them because of the way they conducted themselves.

Demarest: But isn't the question really whether, first of all, negative campaigning is used because negative campaigning works? Second, negative campaigning degrades the political process in terms of the tenor of the debate. So it may be true that how someone responds to a negative attack will say something positive to the voters about the character of that individual, but don't you think that the level of negativism in the political context today is degrading the entire process?

Schnur: The level of negativism and the number of sources from which that negativism can spring, back to Jonathan's point.

Alter: You've been in a bunch of presidential campaigns. You've been in a bunch of gubernatorial campaigns. We've got twenty-some presidential hopefuls today. When we

talk about how does the news consumer sift through all of that cacophony of information, is it reasonable to think that the news consumer can actually do that given this kind of incredible media environment that we've got now?

Schnur: The news consumer can do it if he or she chooses to, but more importantly, the news consumer has the ability to choose what information they want rather than letting Walter Cronkite give you the news.

Alter: Nowadays, if you feel like there's too much air pollution and too much negativity, go to your TiVo. Stop watching dopey commercial television and you won't see all those ads. And if you want to see the latest attack, which I think especially a lot of younger people do want to see because there's humor in it a lot of the time and it can be exciting to see what the latest attacks are, you can go on the Internet and see them. And I do think in some ways the campaigns are only going to be as negative as an individual allows them to be in his or her own life. And that arguably is a step forward except for the people who are too lazy to reach for the channel changer when the negative ad comes on TV.

Schnur: This comes back to the empowerment, also. Not only can you turn off the negativity or the positivity, if you so choose, but if you feel like the mainstream news media is telling you too much about Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama and not enough about the rest of the field, you can learn as much as you want to about Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel in a way that you couldn't possibly have done four years ago.

Alter: Ron Paul is a big star in right-wing blogs.

Schnur: One of my students who starts tomorrow is a field organizer for the Bill Richardson for President campaign. Now, I'm a great admirer of the work that Governor Richardson has done in New Mexico, but he has about as much chance of becoming president next year as I do. But, Daniel was able to go do his Web site, he was able to learn more about the candidate, he was able to get in touch with other people who are supporting Richardson, and after volunteering for Richardson from Los Angeles, California, was able to establish enough of a communication with the campaign that he was able to get involved with a base of information and an array of contacts that simply would not have been possible otherwise. A lot of people can say, "Yeah, it's too much. Forget it. I'm going to watch the Home Shopping Network." But for those voters who want to participate, this empowerment ... to me, that's where it's real value kicks in.

Alter: People always used to complain when I covered campaigns in the '80s and '90s, "Why don't you report more on the issues?" And every cycle I was the issues man at *Newsweek*. I would do these huge take-outs showing where they stood on every issue. Because otherwise my feeling was the campaigns weren't talking that much about the issues, the media wasn't talking that much about the issues. How were people supposed to know where Dukakis and Bush stood on various issues if we didn't put it in *Newsweek*?

But now if you want to know, you can go to their Web sites and you can read their position papers to your heart's content, and it's not really up to us as much to force feed it to people. What we need to do is bring context and perspective to it that you're not going to get from the candidates' own Web sites, because obviously they're not going to tell you how the guy flip-flopped on that issue or why that issue is so important for telling you what kind of a president he might make.

People are always saying, "Why don't you just give me the facts? Give me the facts. Don't give me your take on the facts." And our answer to that is (a) we're not a wire service, and (b) the Internet is nothing but raw information, and so what we do and I think other news organization do is dig up stuff that you can't get elsewhere—fresh information—and also to provide some perspective.

I guess what bothers me right now about a lot of the response I get from the MSM (the mainstream media) is this sense that we're not providing any added value. And it reminds me of a comment by my friend, Michael Kinsley, the wonderful columnist and the founder of *Slate* on-line magazine, and he said when he goes into a restaurant, he doesn't want the food cooked by the people at the next table. He wants it cooked by a chef who's had some training in pulling together the ingredients. So when I hear from people (and I get a tremendous amount of hate mail, I have to say): "I can get much more from the Internet than I can possibly get from you," and "Jump in the lake," and blah, blah, blah, and then they say (several times this has happened), "And, by the way, you never report blah blah blah blah blah." I write them back and say, "Actually, that story that you referred to was actually broken by *Newsweek* in 2002." And it's all gone into that Cuisinart in people's minds; they're not quite sure where they heard it or where they read it. All they know is that the old mainstream media doesn't get it done. They don't know where they got it, but where they actually got it was from *The New York Times* or *Newsweek* or CBS or, if you trace it all the way back, sometimes from a foreign newspaper.

Demarest.

Before we go to questions, I want to touch on one other thing and have you both briefly give me your take on it. You talked a little bit about this in your opening comment. Every policy maker's nightmare, every politician's nightmare, when they're called upon to defend themselves against a charge that they don't know the answer to is that they have to make a decision before they have the information upon which to base a sensible decision. Yet the political pressures are there because of the instantaneous nature of the media today demanding that they respond. How big a problem is this going forward?

Schnur: It's a problem for undisciplined politicians. It is an added challenge. It's one thing if I'm holding a news conference in 1988 and Jonathan Alter and four other print reporters are covering that news conference. I can say, "Hey, guys, give me until four o'clock today and I'll be back to you with answers." But now, if there's someone sitting next to Jonathan with a cell phone video camera, yes, the pressure is on me. But the pressure has always been there from television and radio. It's very difficult for any candidate, any elected official, to look out at a bank of television cameras, to look into a

field of microphones and say, “I don’t know the answer to that. What I’m going to do is I’m going to gather all the necessary information, I’m going to review it, and then I’m going to come back to this place at this time tomorrow and give you an informed, considered answer.”

Demarest: I think you *can* do that. People like that when you do that.

Schnur: I was just going to say that it takes a disciplined candidate and a disciplined politician. Certainly the pressures you described are much greater than with radio microphones and television cameras, but it’s the same dynamic to be able to say, “I know you want an answer right now, but even more than the voters deserve a fast answer, they deserve a correct answer. So I’m going to gather all the information. I will meet you back here at this precise moment in this precise space, ‘same bat time, same bat channel’ tomorrow and I will answer your questions.”

Alter: I’ll tell you what I think is really sad about this. I have problems with the YouTubing of everything because I think some downtime is good for candidates. People shouldn’t be accountable for everything they say all the time. Let’s look at the John McCain “Bomb bomb bomb, bomb bomb Iran.” One day at an event not too long ago, he chanted to the tune of *Barbara Ann*: “Bomb bomb bomb, bomb bomb Iran; Bomb bomb bomb, bomb bomb Iran.” And people said, “He shouldn’t be joking about that; that’s awful. That’s terrible that he would be saying that.” He had to apologize and everything. And that was what I liked about John McCain in 2000. We would travel around with him and he had this kind of carefree attitude. Maybe sometimes it was a dumb joke or an inappropriate joke, but because there wasn’t a camera on him all the time, we got to know him more as a human being. I think it’s hurt McCain a lot this time that he can’t let the impish part of him out and he has to be so programmed and on-guard all the time. What it means is that the press and then thereby the public get to know these people less well as human beings. It makes the campaign more boring. They’re always on message and sure that there’s a camera on at all times. They never let their hair down and we don’t have as many insights to them as human beings. I think that’s a real loss for the process, and I don’t think the gain, which is the “Gotcha—we got him!” is worth it, although I do think it’s good that George Allen’s not in the Senate anymore.

Schnur: Putting the George Allen aspect aside, I disagree with you a little bit on this one, Jon, because just like it’s not the attack but rather the response, it’s not the video clip, it’s the context. I’ll give you another McCain example from 2000—one that was not on video but in print, and one in contrast with then Governor Bush. In the early stages of the 2000 campaign, as many of you may remember, Governor Bush was doing an interview with a Boston television reporter who gave him sort of a pop quiz and asked him to name the leaders of four foreign countries, and Governor Bush accurately said that the name of the leader of Taiwan was Lee. Other than that, he didn’t do so well.

Alter: Including the prime minister of Pakistan; he didn’t know who that was.

Schnur: So, huge story everywhere. George Bush doesn't know what he's talking about. He shouldn't be president, and on and on. About a week later, we're on the bus with McCain in New Hampshire (actually, I think at that point we were in Vermont; we got lost that day—such is the problem of traveling by bus) and the senator was trying to think of the name of the woman who had taken on a position overseeing human rights for the United Nations, and he couldn't think of Mary Robinson's name. He described her position as the leader of Ireland, he talked about her biography to some extent, but he couldn't think of her name. And the next day, a little story ran on page A27 of *The New York Times* saying that John McCain couldn't think of the name of this individual. And the Bush people went crazy on us. They said, "Ah ha, this is the bias of the mainstream news media" because George Bush didn't know three peoples' names and it was on the news for a week, and John McCain didn't know this woman's name and it was on page A27. And the difference wasn't the screw-up; the difference was context. The difference was that John McCain had been sitting in the back of the bus with *The New York Times* and with Jonathan Alter and twenty-five other reporters for hour after hour after hour talking at great length about the history of the Irish Republic, about its relationship with Great Britain, about Mary Robinson and her political biography and how she came to the United Nations and what the United Nations was doing on the very important subject of human rights. So the fact that he forgot a name was not nearly as important because context surrounded it.

Alter: Because it wasn't on TV. That was that main thing; nobody had a camera on him. Today they would, and I think that's the problem. I think they should actually try to—they'll never succeed in this—but that campaign was the best for a reporter that I've covered since ... I go back to 1980. And it's because there was so much opportunity to get to know the candidate and to talk to him endlessly on that bus. He's not doing it this time. He said, "Let's ban cameras." This will never happen, but I really do think that they should say, at least some of the time, Let's ban cameras from traveling on the bus, or whatever. Franklin Roosevelt (I've got a chapter in my book on his press conferences), and before Roosevelt you had to submit all questions in writing. And Roosevelt said, "I'm going to have this innovation. I'm going to have two press conferences a week." Can you imagine a president having two press conferences a week? But no radio, no cameras, and he was able to get away with it. Now obviously today you couldn't do that with press conferences, but I do think that the ubiquity of everybody's cell phone taking pictures all the time, recording everything, is a little bit out of hand. I worry about professors: everything they say in class is now on the record and could be sent all over the world by some student who thinks they're biased or something. That's not a good thing. When Joe McCarthy started going after professors in the early 1950s, a lot of universities put their lectures off the record for reasons of academic freedom—to protect people. The technology now is intruding in ways that I hope there's some kind of backlash against so that we can have a little privacy so if I say something stupid tonight I'm not going to be having to dig myself out for the next three weeks from 5,000 e-mails saying I'm a clown. It would be nice if we could return to a world where it was just us.

Schnur: You'd better apologize to the bloggers, then, while you have a chance.

Demarest: Let's open it up to some questions from the audience. We have microphones set up; you can just line up behind the microphones and we do try to emphasize that these are questions and not speeches.

Question from the Audience: My question is how has Obama done it in the fundraising so much more successfully than anybody anticipated? We did anticipate he would get a lot of money, and he started out so well, but this last quarter is a shocker. What is it about his Internet network or how it's set up or who's running it? Could you put some enlightenment on that for us?

Schnur: This is the distinction between the medium and the message. The reason Barack Obama has excited so many people on-line is the reason he excited so many people during the Democratic National Convention in 2004. It's because he is a compelling, exciting, interesting, provocative, potentially transformative person. You could take Barack Obama's campaign Web apparatus and give it to Chris Dodd and he would still be Chris Dodd and he would not be raising any more money on-line than he is right now. Now there are things that the campaign has done. The Obama and the Edwards campaigns in particular have been very effective at that, and we can dig to that level in a moment if you like. But I think it's worth backing up and acknowledging that the reason that Obama has become this phenomenon is not because of technology; rather, it's about the message that's moving through it. Technology has accelerated it, but if all he had was the technology, he'd be Chris Dodd.

Alter: I agree with you completely. But the great thing that the technology does and that is so positive—and I think that years from now we'll look back on this as being the signature development of this period in our politics—is that when people got really excited about Gene McCarthy, say, in 1968, when his antiwar message was really resonating, he could raise some money through direct mail and get some money from some wealthy individuals who liked his message, but there was no real mechanism for him to get these kinds of contributions and to communicate with his people and then go back to them over and over again. So what this has the potential to do, what the Internet really can do (and I don't think I'm being Pollyannish about this) is to break the stranglehold of big money on our politics if you've got the right message.

Demarest: I think it's also a misconception that the new technologies are all about young people. Evidence has started to come through that more and more people over thirty are engaged through all of these technologies, and that to think of these technologies as a young person's thing only is a mistake.

Alter: But these politicians go and kiss up to rich people all day, every day. This is what their lives have become. They complain about it. We know them. It's the worst part of the job. And this has the potential to not eliminate that entirely; Obama still has to go to Mill Valley or wherever all the time. But he has the potential to do less of that now because 80 percent of his contributors gave less than \$100, and they can give as much as \$2,300. So he can go back to these quarter-of-a-million people over and over again. Everybody assumed that he was just going to get blown out of the water by Hillary

Clinton's money machine and it just hasn't turned out that way. It's the most interesting development of the campaign so far.

Schnur: And to the gentleman's point, the one thing that the Obama and the Edwards campaigns are probably doing better than any others on either side is they've identified not just the young voter but the small donor. We talked about how the Internet can have an impact as it relates to speed. We talked about its empowerment potential. What that also means is convenience.

In 1984, my father watched Gary Hart give a speech after he won the New Hampshire primary. The next day, my dad got up and read about it in the newspaper. About a week after that, he got a piece of mail from the Hart campaign asking for money. A couple of days after that, my dad found his checkbook; a day after that he wrote the check. A week after that, he found a stamp. [Laughter] Three days after that, it got to the Hart campaign. Four days after that, the check had cleared and Gary Hart's presidential campaign could spend that money just as he was announcing his withdrawal. [Laughter]

Demarest:

That's a great point.

Schnur: And quickly, whoever wins the New Hampshire primary next year in the Democratic Party, you'll be watching on-line, and by pushing two buttons, you will have contributed to your favorite candidate's campaign and they will have that money in less than a second.

Question from the Audience: I'd like to follow the money line again. It seems like the big story is not Obama and his policies or what he's saying and the content, but the big story is that he has raised so much money. And that brings me to campaign finance reform. Is there any hope of focusing campaign discussion on campaign finance reform and limiting the amount we spend on these elections?

Alter: The Supreme Court is making it harder and harder and I think, unfortunately—I've been a big believer in it—it's fading as an issue and the Democrats and the Republicans are not going for the matching money the way they used to. They so-called "busted the caps" the last time Dean did so in 2004, so I think it's really hard to keep the momentum for meaningful campaign finance reform. But you can work it at the other end. Obama has some legislation that he actually got through limiting gifts.

It's not in these presidential campaigns where you worry about it that much. First of all, the candidate with the most money doesn't win a lot of the time. It's a free media campaign; it's not what they call a paid media campaign that is determined by ads. So the money's important. You have to have ante up money. But candidates don't get bought in presidential elections. But in congressional elections, senate elections, gubernatorial elections, especially state legislative elections, they are often just bought and paid for by special interests. So the goal in my mind is to have some campaign finance reform, which is always going to be eroded over time because money in politics

is like water rushing downhill—it always finds its way somehow—and then to build popular movements that can use the Internet as a counterweight to the money of special interests so that what we see in the Obama campaign can happen in senate races in California. We've seen a lot of this in California over the years. It's been a leader. Senator Hiram Johnson was talking about this kind of thing 70 and 80 years ago—to mobilize people to stand up to special interests. And the great thing about this Obama development is it suggests that maybe if a candidate has the right message and the right appeal, he can use ordinary people to do that. You know, the Democratic Party very recently—as recently as ten years ago, maybe less—had fewer small donations than the Republicans. The Republican Party had a lot of people sending in \$25; the Democrats had almost none. It was a party of fat cats, and that has changed, and that's a very, very good thing.

Schnur: The terrific thing about the gentleman's question, because I think it gets back to the central point we've been discussing tonight, is if you don't want to read about Barack Obama's fundraising, the answer is to go to Google and type in "Obama and global warming" or "Obama and poverty" or "Obama and Iraq" and you can read about Senator Obama's policy agenda to your heart's content without having any idea whether he's raised more money than Hillary Clinton or less than Dennis Kucinich.

But I guess I'd just make two quick points as it relates to campaign finance reform as an issue. Number one, as you know, my former employer talked a great deal about that issue in the 1999/2000 cycle, and what I learned very quickly is that most of the people to whom he was talking—most of the people to whom we were communicating—did not know the difference between soft money and fabric softener. They were not interested in the details of his proposal. What they did know was that there was something profoundly wrong about the system and they relished a candidate who was willing to talk about it. And earlier this year, when my former colleagues laid out a series of three policy speeches for the senator to give before his official campaign announcement, when I saw that one speech was on Iraq and one speech was on energy and one speech was on the economy and none of the speeches were on campaign finance reform, that was the day I decided to become an undecided voter.

Finally, just my own personal perspective: there are a million campaign finance reforms that could be implemented, all of which can make the process better. I'll suggest just one for you to consider tonight: All donations of any size ... and there should be no limit on the size of a donation (a dollar, a million dollars, a billion dollars; give whatever you want) ... every contribution given to any candidate for any office in every party should be anonymous, and you'd solve the problem.

Question from the Audience: Given everything that you've talked about tonight about politically polarized micromedia and the marginalization of nightly news, what is your take on the threat or non-threat of Rupert Murdoch's pursuit of *The Wall Street Journal*?

Alter: [Sighs]. [Laughter]

Demarest: Remember, this is off the record. [Laughter]

Alter: I don't care. I think he's a menace. [Applause] Ron Burkle: talk about fat cats, he's a supermarket magnate from Los Angeles who is Bill Clinton's buddy, and he's trying to put together a deal, and I wish him luck because I find it hard to imagine anybody worse than Murdoch. He reminds me of the big bad wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*. He says, "Oh, come closer, Little Red Riding Hood, come closer." [Laughter] I was in London three days ago and I picked up *The London Times*, which was his paper, and it was amazing how bad the reporting was here in some papers on what he did to *The London Times*. They only quoted people who were still on the Murdoch payroll saying, "Oh, he hasn't done anything to the *London Times*. It's a great paper." It's a *tabloid* now! This was one of the really good papers in the whole world, and he turned it into a tabloid. And I don't know what he'll do to the *Wall Street Journal*, but it won't be good.

To go back to something we were talking about earlier, people who watch Fox News believe overwhelmingly that Saddam Hussein was involved with 9/11. These are people who are generally well-educated, relatively speaking, but they got such a steady diet of propaganda from Fox News over such a long period of time that they believed in large numbers that black was white and white was black. And that's a dangerous thing. And I think it's very bad for American business. And American business doesn't recognize this because they don't understand that transparency and aggressive reporting on their failures is actually a good thing for them. Because where societies get in trouble, whether it's governments, businesses, whatever, is when there isn't any really tough-minded reporting about what they do and then they can't make corrections. So if you don't have aggressive business reporting—if he wrecks *The Wall Street Journal*—businesses will get fat and complacent and unproductive again. It's like the Republican Congress that abandoned oversight. It was the worst thing that happened to George W. Bush. He thought it was a good thing that he had a rubber stamp in Congress and they never criticized him, they never issued subpoenas, they never said where it wasn't working. If he had had a Democratic Congress or even an aggressive Republican Congress the way Roosevelt had a very aggressive Democratic Congress with Harry Truman doing oversight during World War II, we wouldn't have been in the fix we're in in Iraq because he would have been forced to make mid-course corrections much earlier. So that sounds like it's unrelated to the Murdoch point, but it's all about accountability, transparency, and somebody out there holding your feet to the fire, and Rupert Murdoch will not do that for American business.

Schnur: I was going to take the question about Rupert Murdoch and turn it into an answer about the Phil Angelides for Governor campaign, but we can go on to the next question. [Laughter]

Question from the Audience: I just wanted to ask a follow-up question to one of the ending points that you had at the end of the introductory comments, which was about the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the ubiquity of devices, and I think, Jonathan Alter, you were saying that we need to give the candidates a little bit more of a break—allow them to be more accessible. And being a little bit of a news junkie, I don't mind reading in *The*

New York Times how they talk about what was said on the bus and the personalities of candidates, but as an individual who doesn't have that face-to-face access, I do learn a lot when Hillary's cracking a joke at her husband's expense and then, as you mentioned, how she responds to the little brouhaha that comes out about it. After Dole's failed campaign, he went on the Letterman show and he was a completely different person than he was on the campaign trail, at least I felt, regardless of what you think of his political beliefs, but he was much more personal, much more open, not quite as serious. I just feel like as an individual voter I get to understand the personalities of the candidates if I get to see more of the gaffes or more of the behind the scenes because it is a fuller picture of who they are, and then they just have to respond more intelligently to the commentary of the press. But I wonder—from all of your perspectives—is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing?

Demarest: It's a good point.

Schnur: I think you're exactly right. I agree with you very, very strongly. There was a great article, just a terrific article, in the *New York Magazine* (not *The New Yorker* but rather *New York Magazine*) right at the beginning of June. The author talked about the distance between the public and private candidate, and her theory is that the greater the distance between the public man or public woman and the private individual, the worse a candidate they are. I think one of the reasons my former boss has had so many problems over the last year is that he's been trying to run as someone much different than who he really is. Just like Bob Dole, who after the 1996 campaign, all of a sudden became a lot easier to relate to, look at the difference between Al Gore circa 2000 and Al Gore 2007.

There's an excellent book by Joe Klein, a columnist for another magazine that I'm not allowed to mention here today [Laughter], and it's called *Politics Lost*. The basic premise is how political consultants are ruining American politics. His premise to some degree is a correct one. He gives two examples right at the beginning of his book. The first is from the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated. Bobby Kennedy was in Indianapolis, Indiana. No advisers, no polls, no focus groups; just him and a few notes scribbled talking to a predominantly African-American inner city audience about what had transpired earlier in the day. Many of his listeners had not heard the news yet when he delivered his speech. And what Klein suggests accurately is that Bobby Kennedy's speech was poetry.

The second example that Joe Klein gives is a dinner he had with several of Al Gore's advisers shortly after the 2000 election. He asked Gore's advisers why Al Gore didn't talk about the environment? Why didn't Al Gore talk about global warming? Clearly this is an issue that means a lot to him. Why didn't he talk about it? And Gore's advisers, with great amounts of pride, said, "Oh, we didn't let him. We knew it could hurt him in the Rust Belt. We knew it would hurt him in Ohio. We knew it would hurt him in Pennsylvania. We knew it would hurt him in Michigan. We couldn't allow it." I thought to myself, you know, for years and years now, any number of people who have worked for Al Gore have told me what a wonderful, fun, funny person he is. And I said, well, you obviously have a different definition of fun or funny than I do because that's

not the person I see. And I read that and I thought, no wonder he seems so uncomfortable with himself. He had an issue that he believed and still believes is the most important facing humankind and he wasn't allowed to talk about it in the campaign.

And back to your point (see, I learned a lesson from you, Jon, to take questions and take them off into the stratosphere) [Laughter] ... back to your very important question: seeing the candidate mess up on the campaign bus is fine because maybe not this year but four years from now or eight years from now, candidates who no longer think about on-line campaigning but just think about campaigning will realize that those foibles, those mistakes, those gaffes are a way the candidates can get to know them much better than the prefabricated videos that they post to get an insight into the candidate's humanity on the candidate's Web site.

Demarest: Picking up on that, though, the candidates who do act themselves and do make a misstep—what happens then? What happens to those candidates when the blogs, even the mainstream media, take them apart? Those candidates then retreat and they stop wanting to be authentic and then they leave it to their campaign professionals to produce videos that look authentic.

Alter: I think you've put your finger on the problem, which is that yes, it's great to see C-SPAN campaign trail where you see them shaking hands and you feel like you're there like a reporter, and that's all good. I'm not trying to get rid of that. But if you have everything on camera, then they get gun-shy and they keep the press out whenever they can because so much of it is otherwise on the air, and that ends up hurting them in the long run but they do the cautious thing. The way gaffes hurt is when they play into something that the press and the public already believe. I heard somebody mention the Dean scream. That was an example of something.... First of all, his campaign was already over by the time he did that, so it didn't really hurt him at all. It was just a kind of coup de grâce. He was basically done.

Schnur: Political euthanasia?

Alter: When he was doing that, he had already lost the Iowa caucuses when he had been expected for months to win them and be the nominee, and it was clear, and all of us knew that he was finished that night before the scream. But what the scream did—it wasn't really a scream; it was a typical hyped media event—it played into people's sense that he was a little bit out of control and had been making a lot of other gaffes. And gaffes only resonate when they are used symbolically as shorthand to express something that the press has not been able to get across otherwise, and they play it over and over again.

Demarest:

In 1992, the story ran that George Bush Sr. did not know what a supermarket scanner was, and regardless of whether that was true or not, it was played on the front page of *The New York Times* in a story by Andy Rosenthal that asserted that at a trade show, George Bush was mystified by this new technology. It wasn't that it was true or not, as I say, but

it did play to a perception among the American public that George Bush was out of touch.

Schnur:

But drawing a distinction between C-SPAN on one side and a cell phone video on the other, to me I think ignores the fact that we were just at a certain point in time. In 1968, candidate Richard Nixon hired a former producer for *The Mike Douglas Show* to produce his campaign events, and they put together what we now call town-hall meetings, where average voters got to ask Richard Nixon questions about what he would do if elected president. And it made him look like a regular guy. Before 1968, when candidates appeared on camera...

Alter: Roger Ailes

Schnur: ...Roger Ailes, now the head of Fox News, and I know we'll get back to that in a minute, won't we, Jon? [Laughter] But prior to that moment, when a candidate appeared on television, he stood behind a podium or he sat at a desk with a flag behind him and a pitcher of water next to him. The idea of a candidate being filmed as he or she casually worked their way through voters on C-SPAN was unfathomable in that era. I suggest to you that even if it's unfathomable to you and me now that a cell phone video can provide legitimate coverage, that four years from now or eight years from now, candidates will know not to be any more afraid of that than John Edwards and Hillary Clinton and Mitt Romney are of C-SPAN cameras.

Alter: Well, what's interesting to me this year is watching Hillary Clinton, who is not a natural like her husband, try to soften her image with the Internet using this contest to pick her theme song, *The Sopranos* scoop, these kinds of things. That's the merging of the consultant-dominated process with the new media. When a grass-roots campaign is ginned up by lobbyists, they call it astroturfing. And I'm not sure what they'll call this, but it's sort of a prepackaged Web spontaneity. Somebody here may come up with a name for what this is. It's working for her, I think. She does seem kind of softer and more accessible; it seems like she has a sense of humor. I think it's helping her, but it's all the product of Mandy Grunwald and her consultants who are desperately looking for ways to soften her edges.

Schnur: And right now it's a battle between consultants and spontaneity. I would argue it's the last gasp; that not only four years from now, but probably one year from now as we're watching the general election candidates on-line, videos like the Clinton video, like Mitt Romney telling jokes with his wife—voters are going to dismiss those out of hand because they know they're prefabricated. And the candidate who exhibits the genuine moments of spontaneity (as the last questioner asked about an hour or two hours ago) [Laughter]... that's going to be the candidate...

Alter: I don't agree with that. I think it just depends on whether it's funny and well done. Like Obama's thing when the Chicago Bears were in the playoffs. I don't know if any of you saw that; we don't have it as a clip. You know, he starts, "I have a very

important announcement to make,” and you think he’s going to announce for president, and he puts on this Bears cap and he says, “Go Bears!” You know, it was totally prepackaged and cooked up, but because it was funny it sort of worked. I think one of the great things that’s happening, and this is something very smart that Hillary’s doing—she’s having a contest for user-generated pro-Hillary videos—tapping into the creativity of her supporters. I think the real battle with consultants (and I noticed this in interviewing the top consultant to one of the candidates recently) ... he was talking about his vision for the kinds of ads they were going to do. I said to him, “Well, maybe your vision isn’t really going to matter. The ads this years that will dominate will be ones that regular people cook up and that get a lot of hits on YouTube, and you guys will all be, if not out of business, at least relegated to a lesser and more appropriate place in the cosmos.”

Demarest: We’re almost out of time, but you’ve been waiting patiently.

Question from the Audience: I hate to send this thing into overtime, but you’ve answered the first half of my question.

Demarest: It was inevitable. [Laughter]

Question (continued): In the 2004 campaign, we know that Howard Dean got sent to oblivion by the one speech that he made. Now, we’ve got about another six or seven months before the primaries. How do we prevent a candidate of either party from doing the same thing with the iPods and the iPhones, and so on? Would that mitigate a gaffe like that on television?

Alter: First of all, I don’t think I made myself clear. That scream in that speech had absolutely nothing—I mean nothing—to do with the collapse of Howard Dean. He was finished as a presidential candidate earlier in the day. He had lost the Iowa caucuses after he was expected by everybody to win them, and he not only lost; he lost badly. He finished a distant fourth. His presidential campaign was over. But what happens sometimes is that something comes to symbolize something, and that came to symbolize the end of his campaign even though it didn’t actually contribute to it in real time. But you’re absolutely right that something else like that could this year have the potential to scramble everything, which is why I am loath to say who is going to win. People ask me all the time, “Who’s going to win?” It’s way too early, as you say. There are too many variables and too many different things that could happen that are uncontrollable and that could spin the process.

Schnur: Let me talk about this quickly from a strategist’s standpoint. You can’t avoid gaffes, you can’t afford bad news; you can’t avoid scandals. What Bill Clinton knew and what Gavin Newsom learned and what Tony Villaraigosa, the mayor of Los Angeles has not yet figured out, is that you can’t make those things go away; you can’t make them disappear. You surround them. You take that embarrassing moment, whatever it is, and you make it as small a piece of the overall amount of information available about your candidate as possible. If the only thing the voters know about my candidate is that he

said something dumb in the back of the campaign bus, then he deserves to lose. But, if he's the kind of candidate and if I'm the kind of adviser who can say, "OK, we're not going to spend the rest of the campaign talking about that gaffe," and we're going to make sure voters know what he wants to do about Iraq, know what he wants to do about economic growth, and know what he wants to do about energy independence, that gaffe becomes a much smaller piece of information available. That's how you keep ... not the Dean scream, as Jon mentioned ... but that's how you keep the gaffes from taking over.

Alter: It's a really hard problem. What does Edwards do about the \$400 haircut? He's tried to joke about it. It's sticking to him in ways that are causing problems for his campaign.

Schnur: He talks about poverty every single day of the campaign and makes sure that people understand that while he may have made a mistake getting that haircut, it should not outweigh the legitimate public policy agenda he has. He's doing the right thing.

Demarest: We'll take one more question.

Question from the Audience: I just wanted to get back to the saints versus sinners and Fox versus NPR and ask you if you think there is any hope for crossing the great divide and having a conversation again and how that would happen?

Schnur: Well, I used to think so. But three years ago, when I was invited here and you asked me a similar question, I suggested that you invite me to dinner. And that hasn't happened yet. So I'm a little more skeptical these days than I used to be. [Laughter] But I would say more broadly this ideological isolation ... what did you call it?

Demarest: The Daily Me.

Schnur: I think there is real hope, and it's not going to be solved by my generation or even by Jonathan's or David's. [Laughter] Rather, those of us political professionals in both parties use this media to divide and conquer. We use it to fan the flames of suspicion. We use it to get people angry. We use it to motivate our saints, as I talked about earlier. But what I see among my students—teenagers and people in their early- or mid-twenties—is that they use this media in a much, much different way: they go to Craigslist, they go to MySpace, they go to Facebook, and instead of using it to build walls, the way both parties do now, they find this technology as a way to meet people, interact with people, and form relationships with people whom they might not have met under other circumstances. Now a critic will say, "Oh, but what are they talking about? They're talking about sports, they're talking about music, they're talking about girls." Well, when I was a college student I used a communications mechanism called the telephone, and I did not use it, for the most part, to talk about profound matters of public policy. [Laughter]

Alter: Yes you did, Dan. [Laughter]

Demarest: He did. I knew him then. [Laughter]

Schnur: I used to talk about sports and about girls, and as I got older I did not stop talking about those things but began to talk about other things as well. But as these young people get older—having learned to use the Internet to make connections that never existed before—just as they use them for social relationships now, for favorite bands and favorite sports teams now—I think there's tremendous hope as this generation moves into the body politic and uses these same technologies to bridge the partisan divides that our generation has been so talented at creating.

Alter: I completely agree with you, but I also think that I'm even more hopeful because the yearning for conversation is strong, and I think that a lot of the Obama phenomenon is that he does not trash Bush in his speeches. He has a Republican with whom he worked in the Illinois legislature who is featured in his ads in Iowa right now saying Obama can work across party lines, and even though we didn't always agree he can build consensus. And that is a reflection of their understanding that there is a yearning in the electorate to renew the conversation and that people are tired of this hyper-partisanship. So I do think that this election is going to see a little bit of a backlash against people who are always fighting the last war, and the last war was highly partisan. And I think candidates who succeed are those that tone it down and that talk about consensus.

Demarest: That also means that everybody in this room has a responsibility to demand that kind of dialogue, demand that kind of conversation. If you go back to the Kennedy-Nixon debates . . . I would commend them to you. Get a tape and take a look at the level of discourse that occurred in those debates compared to what passes for a debate today. It is a real education. So with that, I'd like to thank our guests, Jonathan and Dan. You did a great job. [Applause]

Jonathan Alter

Since 1991, senior editor Jonathan Alter has written a widely acclaimed *Newsweek* column that examines politics, media and social and global issues. He has covered the last six presidential campaigns for *Newsweek*. He frequently interviews American presidents and other world leaders and has authored more than 50 *Newsweek* cover stories.

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Dan Schnur is one of California's leading Republican political and media strategists. His record includes work on four presidential and three gubernatorial campaigns as well as extensive experience on behalf of a variety of non-profit organizations and private sector companies. He is a founder and principal at Command-Focus, a Sacramento-based political strategy and communications firm.

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David Demarest served four years as an assistant to President George H. W. Bush and member of the White House senior staff. As White House communications director, he worked directly with the president, the White House chief of staff and the Cabinet, and in that capacity managed a broad range of White House communications activities, including presidential speech writing, public liaison, media relations and intergovernmental affairs.

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