

Maxwell School/Public Agenda Policy Breakfast

"Road to the White House" Analyzing the 2008 Election With Paul Begala

April 11, 2008

Transcript of the Maxwell School / Public Agenda Policy Breakfast Discussion with Paul Begala, Former Counselor to the President, Clinton Administration, CNN Analyst and Research Professor for Georgetown University. Discussion moderated by Robert Siegel, host of National Public Radio's All Things Considered.

[The speakers were welcomed and introduced by Public Agenda's President Ruth Wooden and by Maxwell School Dean Mitchel Wallerstein.]

Robert: In honor of CNN I was going to begin with my Larry King questions. Who's going to get the nomination, Paul?

Paul Begala: We were talking about this before. The predictions that I make—or any of my colleagues and competitors—are really almost useless. Generally they are because we don't have any special knowledge about tomorrow. You can analyze a trend line. Maybe you can try to figure out why those particular trends happened, but there's no good reason to believe tomorrow will be just like today or even more so, which is always what you tend to think. Upholsterers have this phrase, “Trust the trend.” Okay maybe if it's the day before the election and one trend is going [makes gesture], but they really are useless. Having said that, this is how I earn my living, so I—Larry says that.

It is more likely than not that my party nominates Barack Obama. You have built into the system now, because of proportional representation, a really almost inability for Senator Clinton to overcome his delegate lead even though it's narrow. It's something like 135 out of something like 3000 cast. Because of proportional representation, it's unlikely that she surpasses him in the—as they call them—pledge delegates. It's also impossible for Barack, highly unlikely for Barack, to secure the nomination without super delegates as well. Neither of them can win with just real people. They have to go to the House of Lords, which is an odd thing for the Democratic Party to have.

Robert: It's a mixed bag those lords. These are all the Democratic office holders and National Committee men.

Paul Begala: I think it's not mixed. I think it's unalloyed bag.

Robert: Really? You would just have straight pledged or elected delegates.

Paul Begala: Right. Why not let people decide? This all came about after the Democrats nominated George McGovern. First off, all that happened in '68 where Senator Kennedy ran and was murdered, then McCarthy was [searched back]. At the convention the Democratic leaders

decide, “That’s very interesting children. Thank you all for voting for these anti-war candidates. We’re going to shove a pro-war candidate—who had not even entered a single primary—down your throat.” Then there was a commission and they set up all these primaries to let people vote. People voted. They put George McGovern in and we got slaughtered. Now they have this two tiered system. I don’t like it at all. I don’t think it’s good for the system.

Robert: I'm going to ask you this question in your capacity as a political consultant. To what degree do you think the Democratic race is where it is today because the political strategists, consultants, ad makers, pollsters, and speech writers have been better on one side than those on the other side?

Paul Begala: That appeals to my bias as somebody who does this for a living. Ultimately candidates matter most. As Disraeli said, “A leader must know himself and the times.” I think Obama figured out the times, certainly better than Senator Clinton did. Having done this now for 25 years, I know both of their chief strategists very well and for a long time. There’s just not a comparison. Mark Penn who is chief strategist for Hillary—the [James Carlo] actually said this. I’ll quote him. He said, “It’s interesting you give yourself the title of chief strategist and you don’t have a strategy.”

That’s not entirely true. Penn wrote a book. It’s called Microtrends. In it he says, “The era of big trends is over.” That’s like two months before Katrina going into New Orleans and saying, “Don’t worry the era of big storms is over.” you might be right, but you might be wrong. You hear somebody say, “Build an ark.” Mark decided that small things would matter most, really tiny segments of the electorate, non-Catholic, Hispanic women—both of them. He slices the bologna incredibly thin. He’s also, in addition to be a political strategist, he’s the leader of one of the biggest influence pedaling shops on K Street in Washington.

Robert: Burson-Martseller.

Paul Begala: Burson-Martseller, which is an inherent conflict of interest, so then you wonder why the campaign looks like Exxon-Mobile instead of what it is. I know Hillary now 17 years. She’s treated me like family. She’s actually quite unconventional. She’s really had an interesting path. She’s always, I think, followed her heart. Instead this campaign has been so incremental and corporate. Obama and his guy, David Axelrod—also somebody I know quite well—they look at the same universe. They thought, “This is a big election about one, big unifying theme of change.” They ran on that. I think that these things matter.

Robert: Not to put too fine a point on it. Her campaign has been pretty badly run is what you're saying, very badly thought out.

Paul Begala: Yes.

Robert: You mentioned the times, which reminds me that she actually got the endorsement at the New York Times here before the Democratic Primary. Do you think she's been dealt with unfairly by the press?

Paul Begala: Oh, sure. Not so much the editorial pages. People expect them to be pro or con anything, but yeah I think there are real biases in the press. It's not a left/right bias like my friends on the right think. There's always a bias for the new. Barrack is new. She's not. He's a shiny, new object. There's also, I think some of it's just demographics. Hillary's demographic is mostly white, working class folks and Hispanics, which are hugely underrepresented in media. Barrack's base is highly educated white people and African-Americans.

At least high educated white people are media, but there's also—you tell me, but I think journalists—they're trafficking words. They like words. Barrack is so felicitous. He's so gifted with words. You can't help, but be impressed by that, particularly after Bush. Watching George Bush complete a sentence is like if you have a really fat, drunk friend trying to cross an icy road. You're rooting for him though. You're like, “Come on, sir. You can do it. Come on.”

Barrack by contrast, he's like a fighter pilot. He's got this F-14. He swoops and he barrel roles. I'm watching, thinking he'll never land that grammatically and then he does. One last dependent clause and he's perfect three point landing. Some of it is understandable, but also I think there's a third part of it, which is that a lot of folks in the media really didn't like her husband. They feel like somehow he got away with something as if somehow he didn't pay a price for his infidelity and his lies, so I think there's a really grinding—among some—anti-Clinton thing that she inherits.

Robert: I was struck when Carville wrote a column for the Washington Post a week or so ago justifying his Judas remark about Bill Richardson. When Richardson endorsed Obama, Carville remarked that he had acted in Judas-like way on Good Friday, I believe was the comment. He defended it. He talked about how Richardson owed so much to the Clinton's. He spoke of them in tandem. The loyalty that he owed was to Bill Clinton. How much sense does this make? How problematic is it for the first lady to be running in what appears at some level to be a restoration campaign?

Paul Begala: At some level, but she's also her own person as all of us who know them know. That's what makes it kind of interesting and more complicated. You're right. In Richardson's defense he said, “Did James not notice that I had already run against her? I already sort of decided she probably wouldn't be the best president?” For me there was an added thing, which is that Governor Richardson promised the president that he would not endorse Barrack. He promised many of Hillary's top financial supporters that he would not endorse Barrack, so then it becomes not Judas, but he just didn't tell the truth.

Robert: Way back 1992, which feels like an incredibly long time ago, the whole success of the Clinton campaign or one way of describing it was that a candidate associated with the Democratic Leadership Council—center Democrats—press were not going to make the mistakes of George McGovern and Walter Mondale. The Democrats were going to have a very clear eye on the center of American politics and nobody was going to call them just a straight out liberal party. You listen to what Senator Clinton and Barrack Obama are saying this year. Are you struck by where the center is and what the Democratic Party is saying this time?

Paul Begala: Largely thanks to George W. Bush the center of the country has moved left, so the center of the Democratic Party has as well. He marched us into this war with Senator Clinton's

support and Senator Kerry and many of the leaders of my party. Not all, but if you add the House and Senate together, the majority of Democrats still did oppose the war, but many of our most prominent leaders supported it. The revulsion against that has really helped move the country, not just the party, to the left. If you look at Pew surveys, which has been doing this now a long time, the percentage of Americans who say things like, “Government has an obligation to help those who can't help themselves,”—a classic question of liberalism—has gone way, way up even amongst self-described conservatives over the last ten years. Some of it is the country's been radicalized. I think George W. Bush could be the dominant player in this election even though he's not on the ballot.

Robert: I remember two years ago, just before the '96 election, Donna Brazile was describing the Democratic strategy. It was George W. Bush, George W. Bush, George—and I said to her, “He's not on the ballot and never will be again.” She said to me, “Oh yes he is. Oh yes he is.” We're going to run against him. It worked. Do you think again it's going to work or John McCain is a new figure who brings the Republicans forward?

Paul Begala: This'll be the test. If Senator Obama or Senator Clinton, whoever wins in my party, are able to make the case—because I think it's there—that McCain represents more of the same and they represent change, they'll win the election. By more of the same I mean Bush. I think Donna's exactly right. I would keep Bush in the frame, every frame of that film from now on.

I'm going to make—and I'm actually going to play a role in doing this, so I'm not just predicting. That iconic hug, you know when McCain went and hugged Bush. It looked like on National Geographic when the beta wolf surrenders his jugular. It's pathetic. I would make that hug the iconic image. I would wrap it on busses and on billboards, particularly anywhere near McCain's home or office.

Yes, he is completely the third term for Bush. I've been trying out slogans. He's closer to W than X, Y, and Z put together. I don't know. It suggests you sort of fought through the alphabet.

Robert: Something unusual about McCain. I want to hear you talk about McCain as an adversary. I've heard McCain's speaker about his daughter seeing that picture while in Europe and emailing him, “Oh how could you, dad?” In other words McCain is capable of a certain amount of irony about himself and about politics, which is unusual—I think it's unusual—for a presidential candidate.

Paul Begala: It is. At its best it's irony, but like in that situation it's duplicity. It's betrayal. “How could you?” would be the question I would ask. George Bush's supporters in South Carolina attacked his wife, attacked their daughter, Bridgette, who was adopted from Mother Theresa's orphanage. She's a dark-skinned girl. They accused her of having been the product of an affair with a prostitute. It's always a prostitute. It's always interracial, at least in South Carolina.

They were savage to him. They even attacked his service as a POW. It seems to me, you don't hug somebody who does that. You punch them in the nose. Maybe it's not polite to punch him in the nose during the campaign, but you do. If he's running in part on his character and integrity, I thought that was an incredibly defining moment in a very painful way that McCain did that, but then look at the follow through.

He is more for the war than Bush. He's Bush on steroids. He wants to increase troops now, right away, above the 160 even that Bush is drawing down to 140. He wants to go above 160, which most of the Army officers tell me we don't have those troops. He wants a permanent troop presence if the shooting ever stops for, as he says, 100 years, 1000 years, or 10,000 years.

Domestic policy—he started out against Bush. He voted against the tax cuts. He didn't want them to be temporary. Now he wants them to be permanent. That's like marrying a girl you didn't want to date. I didn't like it for a little while, but I want it forever. No. I think there's a reassuring case that he is more of the same, that he is a third term for Bush. I think that will be on ballot. Today Ipsos poll came out. He's at 28, an all time low approval rating. I want to meet the 28.

Robert: In other words, McCain's lying when he says Congress has ratings of 20% approval, but that's blood relatives you're down to. Staff and relatives you're down to when you poll numbers that low. Do Vice Presidential candidates matter at all? If so, who are some interesting ones for this year?

Paul Begala: They matter at the margins. I don't think the old analysis is right that they deliver a state here or there or that people keep looking for the next Lyndon Johnson. They matter in terms of what the choice says about the politician. It's the first presidential choice you make. They matter in terms of talent on the stump.

Traditionally—and I think this year especially—presidential candidates will be attack dogs, so you want somebody to carry the attack and carry it well. Probably not quite as nasty as Senator Dole when he ran with President Ford. I'm biased, but I think Al Gore did it just right. He stuck the knife into Bush and Quayle, but he did it in a way that didn't make him look like a vicious little man. I'd say these folks, I hope, think differently. When Bill Clinton chose Al Gore, I wanted him to pick Harris Wofford.

Robert: That was my advice.

Paul Begala: Harris was a client. If you can ever get a client in as Vice President, that's good. Harris was the perfect match. Clinton was moderate. He was younger. He was southern. He was Protestant. He was a governor. Harris was older, Catholic, northeast, and liberal. He'd worked for Martin Luther King in the '50s and JFK in the '60s. He was a perfect match. Clinton interviewed Harris and several others.

As soon as he interviewed Gore he said, "That's my guy." I asked him, "Why Gore? What does he bring?" He's the same age, the same region, same religion, same ideology, everything and he said, "Because I might die." Just he and I were in the room. I thought, "Holy crap. This is a different deal." That's why he picked him.

I wasn't in the room obviously, but I think Bush had the same thought with Cheney. It didn't smell like politics. He didn't pick Dick Cheney for his animal magnetism, his charisma. He didn't pick him for Wyoming's three electoral votes. I disagree with the choice, but I think that was Bush's thought process too.

If this smells like politics, if McCain picks somebody to balance out the age problem—he picks a teenager to make the median age like 55—it'll look like politics right? We'll say, "Oh," but if you pick somebody who's a plausible president, that's good. I think the most interesting choice is likely to come because I think at the end of the day McCain will be pretty conventional.

Mark Sanford, South Carolina, Tim Pawlenti, or one of those guys. I think if Barrack's my party's nominee, he has the capacity to think out of the box. Two people I would look at if I were you—Jim Jones and Tony Zinni.

Robert: You have to explain which Jim Jones you're talking about here.

Paul Begala: Not the dead (talk over).

Robert: He's dead. Good point.

Paul Begala: Jim Jones is a retired, four star Marine General. He was the Commandant of the Marine Corps when I worked at the White House. President Bush made him Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, the NATO job, which is both diplomacy and war fighting. He's an incredible guy. He is a Democrat. He is really smart, really tough, and really understands the world. Now he's running the Chamber of Commerce's proposal on energy security, which is I think one of the biggest un-talked about issues. He'd be a great choice for Barrack. Who knows if he can campaign. Tony Zinni is probably better known. He was the CENTCOM commander, also a Marine, disaffected now Democrat, and much more blunt, much more capable of carrying the (inaudible).

Robert: I thought that while very critical of how we got into Iraq, very critical of any scheduled withdrawal from Iraq as well in Zinni's case was my impression.

Paul Begala: He may have to revisit that. As you know, sometimes you have to rise above principle in politics. George Bush, Sr. famously became pro-life the night Ronald Reagan put him on the ticket. I remember I interview now the departed, blessed memory, Jerry Falwell about that. I said, "Come on. That's a cynical move if ever. His father and mother had started Planned Parenthood and here he is on the night he's chosen for the ticket, he switches to become pro-life not abortion." Falwell said, "Power of prayer, son. The power of prayer."

Robert: The problem with generals is, you can discover, Wes Clark made a run for nomination—it's often said that if you're a four star general you know something about politics. You're not a babe in the woods, but he wasn't ready for prime time as a presidential candidate.

Paul Begala: That's what's so interesting. It's what's so remarkable about Obama's rise this is really hard. It's a unique skill set. We never really know if somebody has it until they try. Look at Bill Frist. He came to Washington and I wrote a big, glowing profile of him for *Esquire* magazine. He was first in his class at Harvard Med. School.

He's the best cardiothoracic surgeon in America. He took his vacations to Africa where he performed surgery on poor people. He runs marathons. He flies his own plane, everything. He's the worst Senate Majority Leader we've had in 50 years. It was a complete disaster. Mitch McConnell, who probably applying for any other job would not even be in the league of a Bill Frist, is a far more able politician, a much better leader for his party in the Senate. You don't really know by conventional analysis who's going to succeed at this.

Robert: In the presidential race, in both parties, if you were to think back to what you thought was going to happen a year ago let's say, what's been most surprising to you about this entire season?

Paul Begala: It's a combination. I think Obama has really been remarkable. I think Hillary's strategy—not to take anything away from Barrack—but Hillary's strategy was just that bad. The third thing is that McCain was able to overcome his position on immigration, which I thought was death among Republicans. He survived it. The issue evaded. He became last man standing.

I was wrong about all of this. I was quite sure a year ago that my party would nominate Hillary Clinton, which looks less likely than not. They're party would nominate Mitt Romney. What's not to like? He's Republican Governor of the People's Republic of Massachusetts. He saved the Salt Lake City Olympics from corruption and fiscal irresponsibility. He made hundreds of millions in bank capital. He created thousands of jobs in Bangalore, India. He had everything. He was a total bust. He had one delegate. As I say, I've been wrong at every prediction.

Robert: You were involved. You were consulting Harris Wolford when he ran for the Senate. This was the Thornburg becomes Attorney General race. Was that (inaudible) race?

Paul Begala: No. Senator Heinz.

Robert: Oh, Heinz.

Paul Begala: Almost to this day, 1991. In April of 1991, Senator Heinz was killed in plane crash.

(Talk over) Casey was the governor, father of the senator now. He appointed Harris to that seat and then Harris had to run in a special election in 1991. Thornburg came back from Attorney General and ran against him.

Robert: He runs heavily on health insurance, on healthcare. The issue really rises in that election as I recall. The Clinton's go heavy on healthcare. Although in the past year it's been played as a case of great experience, when we remembered that it was a colossal defeat for the administration. What happened next was 1994, which was not pretty.

I've been to various panels with people who do healthcare policy. I hear absolutely conflicting interpretations of where we stand. One is the country always seems ready for some kind of major healthcare reform. Get to the brink of it and people just won't vote for it or they won't approve it. Special interests on Capitol Hill are too strong to let anything ever happen. On the other hand I've heard people say that the candidates are phenomenally timid. We've had a cycle that no one sponsoring single payer in the country. What do you make of it? What's the smart thing and what's best for the country for candidates to say about this?

Paul Begala: Those are two different things. The former is probably closer to at least my own view than the latter. This is a country that has always on healthcare preferred the [double a no]. The last really, really big thing was Medicare. When President Kennedy proposed it had very

little support. Had he not been murdered and had he not been succeeded by Johnson, we'd have never had Medicare.

Newt Gingrich says this. Newt says that Social Security's not the third wheel of American politics at all. Reagan raised taxes on Social Security. Clinton taxed Social Security. Presidents have done that and survived. "It's healthcare," he says, "that's the third rail." I think both Hillary and Barrack are informed by that experience in '93 and '94 because they begin by telling you, "It's okay. If you like what you have, you can keep it," rather than big sweeping change. Here it comes, everybody sign up. I think that's the only way we're ever going to get to universal coverage.

There's a problem in the primaries in that critics of Obama's plan say he stops short of universal coverage. Barrack argues, "I don't want to get in the arcane." It is true that people are worried themselves and then you have hundreds of millions of dollars being spent against it. They're hiring everybody in sight in Washington, all these lobbyists. It's really astonishing. That matters. The two Democrats have completely different approaches to this politically.

Hillary basically says, "I'm really tough. I'm going to take a baseball bat and hit them upside the head. That's what they respect. That's what they will understand. The only way to overcome forces like that is the superior force, greater will." Barrack says, "I'll transcend all that. I'll bring people together and win people over. There'll be no baseball bats with me. It'll be come, let us reason together, as prophet Isaiah said."

I do know what I think is better. I'm much more for Hillary's approach because blunt force trauma works in American politics, if people fear you. What's underreported in healthcare is—I head the presentation from the head of the Kaiser Foundation. I think he was right about this. He said, "The McCain proposal is actually the one that's radical in that it would change the status quo more than anything else." McCain has no idea what's in his healthcare plan.

Robert: Are you talking about the interstate insurance competition or the—

Paul Begala: No the coupling of work and health benefits. He would end the deductibility for employers to provide healthcare for you. Healthcare's very expensive already. If you end the deductibility, there's not a sensible employer in America who would continue to provide it. McCain's theorists—he knows not the slightest thing about this, I promise, not to be disrespectful but if you talk to him—and I have—about anything except war and its bar-apple-lemon on the slot machine. He has no idea. His theoreticians will tell you that the only reason we link work and healthcare is because of the Second World War. We couldn't raise wages—

Robert: It's an accident of labor history. It's become a fringe benefit.

Paul Begala: It's an accident of labor history, so let's set it right. The power marketplace is best served when the individual is in power, so here's what we're going to do. McCain says, "We will empower you to negotiate with the friendly forces of ETNA or whoever, rather than you being lumped in with millions of other people where you have a lot more power." You can tell my strong bias against this because it denigrates the whole notion of insurance. It would be colossally radical.

It would be spectacularly radical. I think it won't succeed for that reason. If people started to understand that what Senator McCain is talking about is ending their employer-provided healthcare benefits and throwing them out there on their own, not replacing it with [single payer]

the way Michael Moore or the late Paul Wellstone would've, but replacing it with, "You're on your own." I think that could be a huge problem for McCain and his wife.

Robert: It'd be like auto insurance. Under the McCain plan, you fend for yourself. Can you imagine a result in November that is 1932-like, that is to see change in American politics? So many American's are underwater with their mortgages, the recession is deepening, and the war is not changing. Can you imagine some huge change or is it going to be 51/49, 50.5/48.whatever?

Paul Begala: It depends in the nominee. I think Hillary has a very high floor and a very low ceiling. I think she wins, but it's more like 52/48, 51/49. I think Barack has a very low floor and a very high ceiling. I think he could carry ten states or 40. We don't really know yet. We haven't seen enough yet. If you didn't think about the personalities running, just looked at the fundamentals, it would be a landslide. It should be '32.

This is what troubles me as a political consultant. You do what we call the generic ballot. Are you going to vote for the Democrat or the Republican for president? It's a 15 point swing. That's LBJ/FBR. No Democrat in modern times has won that way by 15%. In the same poll you do the name ballot. Are you going to vote for John McCain or Barack Obama? John McCain or Hillary Clinton? It goes from 15 to like three. Why? Some of it is McCain has really remarkable appeal among Democrats, Independent, and especially his fellow senior citizens. Some of it is prejudice. Let's face it. Hillary and Barack are way more talented than Gore or Kerry, I think, just as politicians.

Robert: As candidates.

Paul Begala: As candidates they're just much more gifted campaigners. McCain is probably not even as good a campaigner as Bush and yet it goes like this. The ah-ha moment for me was this last summer. We have a farm in Shenandoah Valley. I was at this farm.

My neighbor breeds goats. We buy goats from him. He's a retired Naval pilot, just like McCain. Fought in Vietnam like McCain and is a big Republican like McCain. He comes over. He's selling me these goats. We unload them. We're drinking beer and watching the goats get to know each other. It's rural America.

He's a political junky. He says, "What do you think? What do you think?" I always put it back on him. I said, "I'm inside the beltway. I don't know anything. You're out here in the real America. You tell me." He says, "I tell you, ya'll are going to win the White House." He takes another drink of beer and says, "I don't see how the Democrats could lose." He takes another drink of beer. He says, "Unless you do something crazy like nominate a black guy or a girl or something." [Makes noise]

Guess what? That's got to be part of it. There is a reason that my seven-year-old's placemat of the president's is—he did this the other day. He's like, "White guy, white guy, white guy. Oh look. There's Lincoln. White guy, white guy." You know? 220 years and there are a lot of people out there. I think it's great that my party is—as [John Bodanski] said—putting up a black guy or a girl. I think it's great. If ever we're going to break through those prejudices it's going to be a year when the economy's in the tank and we're in an unpopular war and all the stars are aligned.

Robert: That could be making it a lot closer.

Paul Begala: Much closer.

Robert: Is there anyone who didn't run, but when you think back right now just would've been a great candidate or did run but you're still astonished by why he or she is not more successful?

Paul Begala: There's just no justice in the world or Jeb Bush would be the Republican nominee. It's the name. The brand is so trashed. If he was John Ellis instead of John Ellis Bush, he'd be the nominee. Most popular governor of really a big, complicated, interesting swing state. His wife is Mexican-American. His Spanish is unaccented.

Robert: Which is really crummy, but yeah—

Paul Begala: Jeb's is just—I was in Texas when he was governor of Florida. We used to say, “You've got the better Bush over there in Florida.” It must be a difficult Thanksgiving dinner for him to realize, he would certainly be the Republican nominee. I don't even think McCain could put him on the ticket, can he?

Robert: A Bush?

Paul Begala: Because of the name. It's a shame. It's fine with me. It makes it more likely for my side to win in terms of partisanship, but it's really almost Shakespearian how tragic it is for poor little Jeb.

Robert: And on the Democratic side?

Paul Begala: Everybody ran. I don't know who we missed. Both sides, look at these candidates. Seriously somebody should—I hope they do—save the tapes of these early debates when everybody was running because I think—it's my own theory—a failed presidency breeds a stronger successor. Like Warren Buffet swoops in and buys a cheap stock that's really a good company when it's an overall bear market. We saw this in '80 when Reagan ran and Carter was seen as a failed president.

It was Teddy Kennedy and Carter in my party. In the Republican party it was Reagan and Bush and Dole and Hart Baker and John Connolly and Phil Crane and John Anderson. Those are three presidents all running at once. I think Teddy and Dole were probably the two best senators of the last century. Connolly's the best governor my state ever produced. All running at the same time, three presidents in one field. I think there are three or four in this field. If you look all the way across from Romney to Dodd, I think you might have a couple in this race, a couple three presidents.

Robert: You think Dodd has another cycle in him?

Paul Begala: He could maybe. I thought he was great. Dodd, Richardson, and Biden in any other field they're the front runners. The three of them together didn't get a single delegate.

Robert: Get some questions from the audience for Paul Begala. We have microphones here. Why don't you come to the microphone right there. What's your question?

Audience Member: Help me understand something. I'm an old guy. I've seen a lot of elections. I have never heard the case made that the most votes in the primary season is the way you pick the president. I assume that's true because we don't elect presidents that way. Half the states are caucuses and they don't vote. I can understand a candidate having a spin like that, but why would leadership people like Nancy Pelosi put themselves in a box ahead of time by saying, "Whoever has the most votes should win the nomination,"?

Robert: You mean popular votes in the primary season.

Paul Begala: Everybody's now pulling out like their Edmond Burke letter to the electors of Bristol. They're going back to the high school civics books. What does that mean? You should ratify the votes of the people. If you're these super delegates, this House of Lords, what are you supposed to do? What if you're Ted Kennedy, who's one of my heroes. I think he's a political genius. His state went overwhelmingly for Hillary, but he's not a dumb guy. He's thought this through. He's been in the Senate as long as Barrack has been alive.

He thinks Barrack would be the better president. Now does he have to surrender his independent judgment? It's why the whole system is—only the Democratic party could come up with this. The only sensible system for a primary is one that mimics the general election. I don't like the electoral college, but it exists, and so the Republicans said, "Okay it's going to be winner take all by state, just like it is in November." It's the only sensible way to do it. It has the added advantage of giving you momentum, so even if you win now you win by a lot. The Democrats construct the rules from five-year-old tee ball. Timmy gets a trophy. Billy gets a trophy and Charlie. Everybody gets trophy. We're all winners. Try that in business. Try that in sports. I hate my party's system. The House of Lords is part of it, but it should be winner take all by state just like the electoral college.

Robert: I think [Rendellas] made the argument recently that Hillary has done—add up the electoral college votes of the states that she has won in and that's why she should impress the super delegates.

Paul Begala: Right, which is also silly.

Audience Member: A question about money. I thought the conventional wisdom was that because half the states were going to vote by February 5th of this year that money was going to be even more important. Maybe on the Democratic side you can back that up, but on the Republican side Romney's got his own money, Guiliani raised 15 million, Ron Paul raised a huge amount of money, and John McCain—the guy with no wheels on the car—won. Can you explain what happened to the money on the Republican side?

Paul Begala: That's a great point because message matters more. The content of what you say matters more. With McCain, as I say, what struck me the most was that he was a pro-immigration, liberal on immigration, in a party that really had become bitterly opposed to it.

That's what impressed me about McCain. He did it without anybody. I think money is overrated. The last time around John—Howard Dean—wrong Dean.

Howard Dean had the most money going into this. He did great for a little while and then he collapsed. Money is not disposable. Hillary had all the early money, huge, vast sums of it. Now Barrack has more money. He may pull it off in Pennsylvania, but if he does it'll be in part because of money. That's what already the Clinton people are (setting the spin), but Barrack is spending 2.2 million a week which no one has ever done.

I've done four campaigns in that state. Nobody's ever spent like that. Not even John Heinz the ketchup guy. That's not the only reason he's doing better. He's doing better because he's gifted. You have to have some amount of money to be taken seriously, but then it becomes message. I talked to Jim Gilmore when he dropped out. Remember he ran for about five minutes.

Robert: Former Virginia governor.

Paul Begala: Former Virginia governor and I like him. He's a very smart guy. He knows a lot about terrorism. He's just an interesting guy. I talked to him after he got out. He was really bitter. He said, "You have to be a celebrity or a millionaire anymore to run in American politics with people like you in the media." I was really taken aback. Look at Mike Huckabee. He had no money. He had just enough to be credible, but he was so funny and interesting. He's a Baptist preacher. He plays bass guitar in a rock band. My sister's here. She'll tell you we grew up in a small town, Bible belt, very conservative, all our friends were conservative, and they used to say in the Baptist Church, "You can't have sex standing up because it could lead to dancing." That was the old joke.

Robert: They might think you were dancing is the joke, I believe.

Paul Begala: There's Huckabee bugging away. He did it without the money, by the message by being such an interesting, cool guy.

Audience Member: I have a brief question. Is James Jones a client of yours?

Paul Begala: Jim Jones, no.

Audience Member: You said such nice things about him.

Paul Begala: I like him. I saw him serve our country. Full-disclosure I don't have any politicians that I work for. I used to work for Bob Casey, Jr. most recently (inaudible) center (inaudible).

Audience Member: A substantive question. The Democrats seem to have moved so far to the left with both Hillary and Obama heading in that direction. Hillary seems to make no effort to court conservative moderate voters. Do you think they'll be able to get back and reposition themselves in time for the general election or do you think they'll be stuck out there?

Paul Begala: I disagree with premise. First off, ideological band in our country's very narrow. I've done campaigns now in South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. The band in other place the left would say, "We're going to nationalize the oil companies. That's the first

order of business for the left. Then we're going to socialize healthcare.” There's none of that in America. That band is really narrow. I'm not sure what the analog is on the right except suspending the Bill of Rights and torturing people, but that seems to be where we are in their party. I guess I'm not all that worried. I think both of them are perfectly moderate in the sense of American tradition of progressive. They don't strike me as radical at all. I might be wrong.

Robert: What about the one issue of trade, for example? There's a certain amount of posturing about this. There are many assumptions that both candidates are phenomenally more anti-trade agreement in the campaign than they will conceivably be in office.

Paul Begala: I think that's probably true, but you have to watch what they say when they campaign because they're going to be held to it. They actually might mean it. Remember the '92 campaign when Bill Clinton decided to endorse NAFTA in the primaries—going into the Michigan primary. It took some political courage. I remember his wife was against it then. In the White House she was a NAFTA skeptic, so she's not anti-free trade, but she has had a longer history of being skeptical about these things.

Obama less so, but again even there none of them are really saying, “We'll repeal NAFTA.” They're saying, “We'll reopen it to fix this and that.” Given the stress in these states where they're running, particularly Ohio and Pennsylvania, Indiana's coming, that's actually a pretty moderate, responsible course. The folks who were saying, more like John Edwards, “Throw the whole thing out.” They didn't prevail, even in my party. That is a good example of where they're sort of shady. You had this unfortunate event where Barrack's economic advisor—

Robert: Austin Billsby.

Paul Begala: Austin Billsby may or may not have told the Canadians, “Look, he didn't mean it.” I suspect he really means it, but I think what he means is a kind of moderate alteration of some of the facets of NAFTA rather than a wholesale throwing it out.

Audience Member: Can you talk for a little bit about the rifts in the Democratic party after the primary season? How does that compare to rifts in times past? Does it get repaired? How?

Paul Begala: I think they're not terrible at all. I'm not troubled yet. I think it's more a matter of time. The longer it goes, the deeper these wounds go. If Hillary or Barrack decides that they're going to fight this all the way to Denver—I did have one Clinton supporter tell me that, of course none of these delegates matter until they actually cast their votes in Denver.

Robert: By the way, the rules are that no one is truly pledged—

Paul Begala: Until they vote.

Robert: You can go after a supposedly pledged delegates and have them change their vote.

Paul Begala: That was this person suggesting. A Hillary supporter, not a Hillary strategist saying, “We'll go all the way to Denver and get people to switch.” The connection is so late. It's the last week of August. I think there's insufficient time then to stitch things back together, but if

you look at it, this is not Bobby Kennedy and McCarthy against Humphrey. There's not a war that cleaves them. Hillary has moved to a pretty strong anti-war position. Barrack's been there for some time. There's not some really deep rooted thing.

This is a matter of style, whether you prefer an inspirational leader or an operational leader. Maybe that's why it's sort of so petty on some level. One of the problems is we've stopped having debates. When there were debates and they had to actually square off against each other—these are two really smart people, very principled people—it would always change the tone for several days. When there's no debates now, all they're doing is hurling these bombs.

The bitterness is at the elite level, the really close friends and major donors. They've become very bitter. They say right now a third of Hillary's voters will never vote for Barrack and a quarter of Barrack's voters will never vote for Hillary. I don't believe it. I don't believe it all. I think if they do their job, quip up Bush one more time—we may use him like Hoover though. It may be 40 or 50 years.

Robert: Running against him for years. I buy the argument that this isn't like a McGovern/Humphrey/McCarthy. There's not a war between them, but when I think about Carter/Kennedy and I can plead that I was based in London during that election. I got the words, but not the music what was going on. I can't remember what the big argument was now between those two other than the fact that Kennedy people really wanted Kennedy. They wanted a more liberal president, but as to what the bright lines were, I don't know. It's generally remembered as a fairly bad and divisive primary.

Paul Begala: It was essentially personal. I think Senator Kennedy was appalled at the way Carter approached things. Generally, I'm told that the malaise speech really did drive Kennedy off.

Robert: The famous speech in which Carter didn't say the word malaise.

Paul Begala: Yes, but a day or two later that's how he described the speech. That's how it got the name. He was in Kentucky or something. He said, “the other day I gave a very important speech about two things: the energy crisis and this malaise we feel,” so I think it was fairly applied. Go back and read that speech by the way. I used to do that for a living. It's about the worst presidential speech in American history. It's just staggering. It's deeply un-American.

Robert: It's a very pessimistic speech.

Paul Begala: Very pessimistic and it's all your fault. It turns out we're just fundamentally bad people. It was John Calvin at Camp David. It was dreadful. That's a good point. Teddy carried that all the way to the convention. It was time for a change. Ronald Reagan was going to crush whoever was running. I think we can look back in history and see that. By the way people are still bitter about that. Carter and Kennedy people still hate each other. It's interesting because Carter so desperately wants to be for Barrack. I'm sure he will be in the fullness of time, but I think maybe one of the reasons he's not is that Kennedy beat him to it. If Barrack can bring those two together, than he is a true (inaudible).

Robert: Long memories.

Audience Member: Given your familiarity with the Clintons, what role do you think Bill Clinton would play in the White House if Hillary were elected? What role should he play?

Paul Begala: I think they've set the pattern in her career in the Senate where I don't think anybody can fairly say that Bill Clinton is pulling her strings or telling her how to vote on important things in the Senate. Yet, my guess is, he's probably a pretty significant advisor. In that sense it'll be just like any other. I think that he has his foundation. He loves that work. I've talked to him about this. He tried this out on me before he did it with the public. He said, "If Hillary wins, I'll just do whatever she says."

Robert: Very good voice.

Paul Begala: 17 years of hearing that voice. That's the 3 am phone call. By the way, that's the 3 am phone call. The president never gets 3 am phone calls, at least when I worked there. He places them. "You up?" "Oh, yes sir." My comeback to him was, "If Hillary loses, you'll do whatever she says, so that's not really a huge change in your life." I just don't worry about it. I think they've found their equilibrium.

I don't think anybody worries that Hillary will be dominated by her husband. He does have his own thing going on. If he's called upon—I'm sure he will be by any president including McCain—he would go and work on things. I think that President Bush's failure to use that talent in his presidency has been really a lost opportunity. Not that Bill Clinton could have say fixed the Palestinian problem, but sending him over there was a no lose deal for Bush. He's more than likely to fail anyway, but then you've got Clinton in there. It's a bipartisan thing. Anyway Bush (inaudible) think he's done right yet. I'm waiting.

Audience Member: As we approach this primary season, on the Democratic side I looked at the candidate and I said, "The positive about Senator Clinton is she's really confident even though strategically she really failed with healthcare." I said, "She learned from that process," but then we go into this season. After she lost in Iowa I have to say, "What was she thinking? How was she going to win if she didn't put resources into the caucus states and into those small states?" So my question to you is why should we think after these two huge failures, huge, that she could make the correct strategic decisions as president?

Paul Begala: That is a great point. It really is. It's a very interesting one. Those of us you could tell I have nothing but contempt for Mr. Penn and those of us from the beginning who have wanted to see him have asked that. It became almost a Rumsfeldian thing. How often did he have to prove his incompetence before he was removed. By the way, he's still not fired. He's just demoted. I have pretty good sources actually in his front—guys that work for him—said, "He's been demoted, but he's still doing some of the polling, all of the direct mail, and he advises Hillary." Well other than that. That's a valid point.

My counterpoint as a Hillary guy is I never saw anybody run a better campaign than George W. Bush. It was flawless. It had to be for him to steal the first election and win the second one. Yet he was a disastrous president, so I don't know that there's a perfect correlation. It doesn't mean that running a bad campaign suggest you get a good president. I'm not going to carry it that far, but it's a legitimate critique as is a legitimate praise of Barack who was never in

anything larger than the Harvard Law Review. Yet he steps in. He sees the country accurately, at his party accurately, puts the right people in place rather than the wrong people, empowers them. I do think that's an interesting observation. Good point.

Robert: The question being, can we infer from this entire process that we go through for four years something about people as how they might govern that tells us about how good they are?

Paul Begala: I think the real answer is no. It doesn't mean that you should vote for a person that runs a crummy campaign, but it's not a very good predictor. You know what is? How they handle the feat. That's what's been good about this. Obama was beaten by Bobby Rush when he ran for Congress. He's had one important defeat in his life.

I don't ever want to vote for anybody for president who hasn't been defeated, humiliated because—old man Casey used to say this. He was called the three time loss from Holy Cross. He had run for governor three times before he won and lost. He was a joke in that state. (Inaudible) he used to say, “The view from the canvas is highly education. That's where we show our character when we're knocked down.” Think about it. Reagan lost in Iowa to Bush, who I think was the lesser talent, but he lost. He came roaring back and infamously in Nashua, New Hampshire at the high school there he said, “I paid for this microphone Mr. Green.”

Clinton lost in Iowa, which didn't count. He lost in New Hampshire. He lost in South Dakota. When he lost in New Hampshire, he stood up and declared himself the winner. That showed his character. “I win anyway. Second place wins.” Everybody said, “Okay. Good point. You're the comeback kid.” Same with Bush. He lost.

He told a friend of mine this. He said the best thing that ever happened to him was losing to McCain by 19 points in New Hampshire because he came roaring back. He showed his character both good and bad. He stayed loyal to his team, didn't fire crawl over anybody, but that sort of led to the character that's kept Rumsfeld in. He also went very far right and showed ruthlessness that I never thought was in his character going after McCain and his family the way he did. His view was, I suspect, he had to do that in order to win. They show their character when they're defeated. Barrack and Hillary both had important and embarrassing defeats. I'm proud of how each of them has handled it.

Audience Member: Question about issues as we get closer to the election all we hear about right now is Iraq and the economy. Al Gore launched his alliance for climate change two weeks ago and apparently is planning on dumping something like \$300 million into building public awareness. What do you think will be the issues as we get towards November? Will be Iraq and the economy or will anything else be playing a factor?

Paul Begala: I think in analog of Gore's issue should be and will be more important (inaudible) energy independence and energy security. That piece and I've been surprised that people don't talk about it more on the campaign trail. Global warming is an enormous issue. It's hard for the politicians to raise it. First of McCain is slightly different than most Republicans on that, slightly, in that he believes it exists, which is nice after the moon is made of green cheese that we've had for the last eight years.

In the main, that's a difficult thing because it does require some real pain. Right now Hillary, Barrack, McCain, they all sort of say a few nostrums about it and hope nobody really

probes. So far nobody has. There's not much more room once you get the economy—which I think healthcare's a subset of—and the war in there. I think energy independence and energy security and it's my hope that they'll talk about that more. Again that's more complicated. Now we're past Iowa, but the ethanol boom has driven food prices around the world through the roof. It's not doing what we thought it would do for global warming. That too is a lot more complicated. I hope that they raise that point. That would be the third issue I would look for.

Robert: Before we take one more question, I want to follow up on that. Given what you've said about the Carter malaise speech, how do you approach energy consumption and global warming without being a president who tells the country, “We've been over-consuming for a long time. We have to change. We have to start driving smaller cars one day.” These are really unpopular, pessimistic things to tell the American people.

Paul Begala: That's why I'm much more a Bill Clinton guy, than an Al Gore guy. We used to call it in the White House—when Gore would do all his global warming stuff—we used to call it water world because he'd always end with we'd all be drowning. It was like, “God, we have another water world briefing from the vice president. Thank you, sir.” Because it was all Carter, it was all doom, and it was all moral crisis—think of how he talks about it.

It's all our fault. It's because we're bad. We're sinful, evil and awful. People don't like to hear that. If your goal is change, it's probably a good idea not to tell people how evil they are because it doesn't prompt them to change. Clinton takes the same set of facts and says—look at what he's doing with the climate initiative at the Clinton Global Initiative, the climate peace event.

It's much more optimistic. It is really the world in green technology. This is going to be a huge winner for us. We're going to create green collar jobs in all those former rust belt states. We're going to figure this out. It's the same essential thing. He would say for example, “Why are we letting the Japanese beat us on hybrid technology in cars?” I own a Prius. I have to. It's in the liberal (inaudible).

Robert: I confess. I own a Prius.

Paul Begala: Exactly. I actually have two hybrids. They run fine and they're great, but—I think Hillary and Barrack are more in the Bill Clinton sort of mode where—I don't think they're making false promises either. I actually do think this could be an enormous winner for us. I think this is almost analogous to the way the tech boom exploded in the '90s when we got the deficit under control and interest rates. There was all this pent up productivity that just hadn't been applied. There wasn't really any great technological innovation in the early to mid-90s. It was all there, but businesses and families couldn't access it because they didn't have the capitol. I think there's a green tech investment and boom just waiting. If we prompt it, I think it can be a huge winner for us.

Robert: Last question.

Audience Member: On the economy and you may have answered this with that last remark, but there are five huge issues which I'm going to recite very quickly. We got a \$9 trillion national debt, \$500 billion deficit; \$50 billion a month in foreign trade imbalance, the American people

have \$1 trillion in credit card debt. There's no savings whatsoever. Meanwhile the Pentagon, the defense establishment, is spending \$1 trillion a year—close to it—on arms and armies that have nothing to do with the threat we're really facing. I haven't heard a single question in a single debate. All it is healthcare and climate change. There's no mention of these issues. Is there a reason for that or is it just no one wants to hear the bad news? Is it just more water world?

Paul Begala: Not to defend the media—it's not my natural inclination. I think it's been slightly better than that. I really do. These fiscal issues are exactly as you say. Maybe the one bright spot is the collapsing dollar may fix the current account deficit somewhat, not exactly the right way to stop it I have to say, but maybe exports are a little more hopeful as the dollar collapses. The politicians, at least in my party and to a lesser extent McCain, have—go look at their websites—they've thought this through and put out some pretty good policies on it. I actually do think the one who's the most intellectually misleading is Senator McCain. We talked about this a little before. We've talked about earmarks and pork-barrel spending. That works in a poll. This is a very cynical thing. You poll it. The American people will think 90% of their budget is foreign aid and the other 10% is pork. It's just preposterous.

Robert: Pork means public broadcasting.

Paul Begala: There you go. I am pro-pork, but even if McCain is right, there's \$15 billion a year in pork. It's a \$3 trillion budget. That's really going to solve things. It's very cynical by McCain because you know what the problems are. They're baked in. It's part of what has frustrated me so much is that I was a deficit skeptic, I was a deficit dove under Clinton. I think for the good of the country he listened to his economic advisors, not his political advisors. He paid a price for it politically, but I think he did the right thing. The deficit comes way down. We were on a glide path—doing nothing differently—to zero debt by 2011, which mattered because 2013 is when the baby boom really hits. The problem is that was very hard to do in 1993-97 when you did it.

It stretched the political system to the limit. They only passed it by one vote in the House and one vote in the Senate. We finished it up in '07, six years before the baby boomer's are about to retire. Now we are going to take it on in '09 and 2010? We don't have the same time. It's a spectacular problem. I'll defend my Democrats. Go look at their websites. Hillary and Barrack have talked about that in a much more honest way than McCain has. It'll be interested to see if the press presses McCain on that. You can take all that so-called pork, throw it in a top hat, and it won't do a single bit of good for the deficit. That's all McCain likes to talk about.

END