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COLLISION 2012: OBAMA VS. ROMNEY AND THE FUTURE OF  
ELECTIONS IN AMERICA

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**Welcome and Introduction:**

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**Panelists:**

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KAMARCK: Good morning everybody, and welcome to Brookings for this book talk by Dan Balz, author of *Collision 2012: Obama versus Romney and the Future of Elections in America*. For those of you who think you've come to hear about Syria, that's in the next room, and I suspect there might be some people sitting in the next room wondering what Syria may have to do with the election of 2012. So we may see them in here shortly.

We've got a great group here to talk about Dan's book and let me just introduce them. John Harwood, John is the Chief Washington Correspondent for CNBC and political writer for the New York Times. I'm sure many of you have seen him on the television. Bill Galston, senior fellow here at the Brookings Institution, who has often written about politics, often with me.

And right here, who I will introduce, our guest of honor, Dan Balz. Dan was educated at the University of Illinois, Champaign, Urbana-Champaign. He joined the United States Army, unusual among his generation. He worked for the *National Inquirer* and the Philadelphia, I mean the *National Journal* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

MR. GALSTON: She wishes you worked for the *National Inquirer*.

MR. BALZ: I kind of liked the first version.

MS. KAMARCK: I was burnishing your journalistic credentials.

MR. BALZ: I'm going with that.

MS. KAMARCK: And in 1978, he joined the *Washington Post* and he's been there ever since. He's the senior political correspondent. He fills the role of our beloved David Broder who is, you know, everybody paid attention to what he said about politics, and for a new generation, everyone pays attention to what Dan Balz says about politics.

So without further ado, I'd like to have Dan talk about his book for a little book. The book is available for sale outside, and Dan will sign books when this is finished. So we'll have Dan talk for a couple minutes and then I'm going to call on John and Bill to start the conversation and we'll extend it to all of you. Dan?

MR. BALZ: Thank you, Elaine. Elaine was, I think, the first person who contacted me about doing a book talk, many many months ago, so I am grateful to you, and Brookings and Ann who helped make the arrangement. It's a pleasure to have John Harwood here, who is a great reporter and who throws the best bipartisan dance party in Washington every year. And Bill Galston has stepped in nobly for Ron Brownstein who

could not make it at the last minute and Bill is a more than worthy fill in. I think everybody here who knows Bill and who knows Ron would pay money to see the two of them go do a deep dive on political data and discuss the ways of the world, so I'm happy to be a part of this.

Let me just talk for a few minutes, as Elaine said, about *Collision 2012*. This was a sequel in most respects to the book that Haynes Johnson and I did on the 2008 campaign and obviously a totally different book, as it turned out, because we had a totally different campaign in 2012. I think this was, as we look back on 2008, obviously a historic campaign and, in so many ways, had a lot of uplift to it. People came out of that election feeling pretty good about the country, even people who had voted for John McCain, and so that book was a reflection of what was an extraordinary election, and a moment in the country that I think we look back on and think, what was that really about, because it disappeared so quickly.

I mean, this campaign was obviously much grittier, much more negative. When I started out this project, I was not sure that this book would produce a story as compelling as the 2008 campaign because of this history that was made because of the epic battle that took place between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. This one was a stranger campaign, particularly the Republican nomination battle and we can talk

about that a little bit. David Marin is my *Post* colleague, who wrote a wonderful biography of Barack Obama, came up to at one point late in the late fall of 2011 as the Republicans were watching one after the other implausible candidate rise to challenge Mitt Romney, and he said to me, with all due respect to you quote unquote distinguished political reporters, he said, we really need Hunter Thompson to tell the story of the 2012 campaign. And I thought he was right about that.

When I finished this book, or as I was finishing this book, what struck me was, that in so many ways, for all of the aspects of the 2012 campaign that people found unappealing, this election told us more about who we are as a country and where we are as a country than the 2008 campaign did. And I think in that way, if not a more important election to look at, as significant in trying to understand how we got to where we are.

I called this book *Collision 2012* for several reasons. One, it was in essence a clash between the America that had elected Obama in 2008 and America that elected Republicans to the house in 2010, and we can talk about obviously the nature of the different electorates that showed up in those two elections, but nonetheless, those two elections framed two different views of the country.

It was a clash of philosophies, Republican and Democrat, a

significant gap engulfed in how Democrats and Republicans saw a lot of the basic questions that were facing the country, whether it had to do with what to do about the economy, what role government could play in stimulating the economy, the size and scope of government, and obviously a great collision and a great clash of philosophies on many of the social issues.

And the third reason I called it Collision 2012 was because it was a collision between two very different personalities. I mean, if you think of the life experience of Barack Obama and the life experience of Mitt Romney, it could hardly be more different, in the way they grew up, in the way their early lives were formed, and particularly in the way they came to politics.

I mean, one being a community organizer as his route into politics, and Romney's obviously through private sector experience. I think is hard to overstate how different the two men saw the world and in a sense, how much they disrespected the other's view of the world and the positions they took.

As I talked to the two campaigns, you could just sense that President Obama had very little respect for the way Mitt Romney saw the world, and I think vice versa, and so those were the reasons for the title. When you do a book like this, when a journalist does a book like this,

when you approach a campaign, there are two ways to tell a story. One is the obvious way of inside out, and any book undertaken by a journalist seeks to look behind the scenes.

What was really going on inside the campaigns? What were the decisions like? What were the disagreements like? What was happening at crucial points, and how did people see it in retrospect, as they did it. And part of what I tried to do, as I think every author does, is, you're dealing with a story that everyone knows the basic outline.

Everybody knows how it started, everybody knows the ups and downs, and everybody knows how it ends. And so, part of the challenge is to try to come up with, you know, fresh material that says to people, yes you followed this closely but you didn't know everything that was really going on, and that was part of what I was trying to do in this book.

You know, I did a long interview with Mitt Romney at the end of January, just after the President was sworn in for his second term, and it was a really interesting interview. It was just the two of us, there was no aide present, no press secretary there watching the clock, and I found Romney quite interesting that day. We talked for ninety minutes. He was pretty open, he was pretty candid about some things, and he was in other places still digesting if you will, maybe a kind way of putting what had

actually happened, particularly the 47 percent episode in which, when we talked about it, I think he was still in denial that he had actually said what he said, and challenged me when I suggested that he had said that 47 percent of the country would never take control of their own lives.

He said, I didn't say that; his iPad was on a counter nearby, he jumped up and got it and went through it, tried to read to me what he had said, but I think what it was, was a reflection of the fact that he knew how damaging that moment had been and could not still express the idea that he had actually said that, or if he had, that it did not reflect what he really felt. He talked about his confidence in winning.

I said I take it that you were quite confident that on the morning of the election you were going to be the next President, and he said not 90 percent confident, but he said, yeah, I thought we were going to win the election and he said, one example, he said, I had written, he called it, an acceptance speech, a victory speech. He said, I had not written a concession speech.

And he arrived back in Boston after a day of campaigning on Election Day, thinking he was going to be President, and he arrived back in Boston and they saw the early exit poll numbers and they all suddenly realized that this campaign was not going to turn out the way it did. He was also interesting on the self-deportation issue, which obviously had



hurt him.

His view of that is that the phrase self-deportation was benign and not offensive, and we talked about that at some length, as he tried to explain how he was quite surprised by the reaction to that comment and still could not quite understand why it had come to hurt him. And in his own mind, felt that he had not really run in the primaries on the immigration issue, when we all know he attacked Rick Perry on the immigration issue, he attacked Newt Gingrich on the immigration issue.

But as he said, I told my campaign I don't want to run on immigration and yet this was another place where I thought that he was somewhat in denial about it. There is, I thought, interesting stuff about Chris Christie in the book, that was brand new to me and I think brand new to a lot of people. The actual process he went through in deciding not to run, and the back and forth he had with the Romney campaign, about the vice presidency, and also his back stage tirade at the convention when he was told his video was not going to run before his speech when he gave the keynote address, and some of the threats he offered up to the directors before they finally yielded.

So the process of going behind the scenes, particularly on the Republican side, I think, in fact, did yield a lot of new material. One of the things I've always tried to do in a book like this and in my own

reporting, is to try to get the principals into the book. I think a book like this is more valuable when you can talk to the people who actually ran for President and get them to describe what they went through either in real time or after the fact.

So there's a lot in here. The one big hole in here is President Obama, who did not agree to do an interview for this book. He did two interviews when Haynes and I did the '08 book, but for whatever reasons, the White House decided they weren't going to participate in any of the books this year, and so that's, frankly, to me, that's a hole.

But one of the things I wanted to try to understand better was just how the Obama campaign went about getting to where they were in terms of both message and in terms of their operation. And there's a fair amount in the book, A) on how they develop the middle class message and A) why they developed it and how they developed it, and why I think in retrospect, it was significant because of the way it put Romney into a box that he could not get out of, and the degree to which they had structured a middle class message to avoid and to head off the idea that the campaign could ever become a real referendum on the President's handling of the economy or even a judgment about the current state of the economy, that they knew that if they got into that situation, the President's opportunity to win would be much more difficult. And then the other thing I wanted to do

was try to understand better and try to explain better the way in which the campaign used data and analytics and modeling and all sorts of technology to both get a better grasp of the electorate, but also to make their ground game much more efficient. I would not say that their ground game was decisive in the end given the ultimate size of the popular vote and the way the states went, but there's no question that they had a much superior ground game to the Romney team, and the way they did it is a fascinating story. The precision with which they went after individual voters almost is something that I think every campaign that's looking at 2016 will be going to school on. So there's the inside out story.

But there's also the outside in story. I think too often, we in the media either ignore or underplay or dismiss the larger forces that ultimately help to decide a campaign. In this case it was obviously the economy and in shorthand, the question was, was the economy just good enough to allow Barack Obama to win re-election or was it just bad enough that it would make it possible for Mitt Romney to win? Obviously in the end, it was just good enough. I mean, there was economic growth that was tepid, but it was enough to make it possible for him to win against some odds. The second big force, obviously, are the demographic changes. It was surprising in so many ways that the Republicans woke up the morning after the election and said we have a problem with the

Hispanic community, and this is a problem that they've had literally for decades and with some exceptions, this has been a persistent problem. I mean, George W. Bush did pretty well with the Hispanic vote certainly in Texas and in his 2004 campaign, but as a party the Republican Party has been on the wrong side of that community and those issues.

But the demographic forces, Bill Fry has written wonderfully about this, as have others here, at this point are pushing in a Presidential year, are pushing in the direction of the Democrats. The rising parts of the population are more Democratic than are the other parts of the population, whether it's the Hispanic voter, or younger voters, new voters, and trying to understand and describe how those forces intersected with the campaigns.

And the third aspect of this, which is, I think, one of the enduring issues that we have to deal with that existed before this campaign, but was made even more stark in this campaign, and that's the red blue divide. We talk about red and blue America almost in a clichéd way. We all remember Obama's 2004 key note address in which he said essentially, we can get beyond this, we can be the United States of America, not red America and blue America. And yet I think this campaign was shaped in so many ways by those red blue divisions, particularly the red side of it and the opposition to President Obama, and I think we came

out of this even more divided than we had been. The notion that we have elections to have a big debate which then helps to resolve some of the differences in the country and point us in a direction forward, I think we learned in this campaign that at least in the environment that we're in now, in the era that we're in now, that's not necessarily the case, that elections tend to be temporary events and we quickly return to a sense of regular order, which at this point is a great divide between the two parties.

And so, in doing this book, I was trying to talk not only about how campaigns operated and tell that story in an engaging way, but to remind people that there are other things that have as significant an impact on the outcome of the elections. And so with that, I will turn it over to John and Bill.

MS. KARMARCK: Great. John, comments?

MR. HARWOOD: Well, I just wanted to expand on one point that Dan made about 2012 telling us more about the country than 2008, which I think is true and a valuable insight. In many ways, 2008 was a cyclical election in which you'd had a two term Republican President who was extremely unpopular, a war that was extremely unpopular, financial crisis, all that created conditions for the party of change to come in, notwithstanding the fact that you had an African American Democratic nominee, which we're accustomed to thinking of as something that was

very difficult to achieve in the first place and then to win a general election.

But you had much more neutral and even conditions in 2012 for competition. You had a weaker economy. You had an incumbent who had advantages of incumbency as they tend to do, in particular not having a nomination fight and being able to tune this machine throughout the course of his first term and be prepared to do the analytics that the analysts talk about.

And a nominee who, you know, I think Mitt Romney ultimately was a bad candidate because he was not an authentic candidate he didn't feel comfortable in his own skin. But he was somebody who was a presentable candidate who, in a circumstance when the country's evenly divided, if he could get to the nomination, which he did, not grotesquely crippled, just a little bit crippled, he could be in a competitive situation. But what you ultimately had was a competition between the America that was and the American that we're in the process of becoming. And nobody knows exactly when those lines cross in a definitive way.

There's still some debate among Republicans about whether they in fact have crossed, but what you've got is a white party, an older conservative white party, male tilting party, and a Democratic party that is benefitting from all the demographic changes and the passage of time, cultural changes within the country. And to me the most dramatic

reflection of that was thinking about the difference between 2004 and 2012, when 2004 among a bunch of things going on, you had Republicans using social issues as an offensive weapon, and being able to surf the underlying cultural conservatism of a critical mass of the country, to use those issues to protect an incumbent who was shaky as Barack Obama was somewhat shaky in 2012. And in this election, enough had changed, that those same social issues became an offensive weapon for the Democrats. The Democrats wanted to talk about gay marriage, they wanted to talk about threats to women's health and abortion and all those sorts of things, and I think that was an important marker that 2012 clarified about where we're going.

To me the challenge for Republicans going forward is, they are sort of trapped within a paradigm and a way of thinking and a political base that is barring them from connecting with the rest of the country, and they've got to figure out some way to break out of that. They clearly have not figured that out yet. They may have to lose another national election before they're compelled to figure it out. They still have enough strength to hold, I would expect, the House of Representatives, unless the little jail that they exist in is so confining that they, for example, shut down the government and have a debt crisis in three weeks, which, if it happens, could actually blast them out of the majority of the House of

Representatives.

MS. KAMARCK: Great. Bill?

MR. GALSTON: Well, I want to raise four or five questions very quickly that I hope Dan can talk about and the rest of us can talk about as well, but first of all, just to be a little bit contentious, I actually think

MR. HARWOOD: You jerk.

MR. GALSTON: I actually think that Romney came out of the primaries pretty badly damaged. And, you know, I think he was badly damaged on immigration. I think he was bad, I think the release of his tax plan badly damaged him. I think his failure to release his tax returns was damaging. I think the fact that it was Newt Gingrich who opened the front on Bain so conspicuously opened the door for the summer assault, and I absolutely agree with you, on women's issues, he did less than nothing to separate himself from the most unregenerate members of his own party. You know, he had Sister Souljah opportunities to burn, he didn't avail himself of any of them. And so I think you're absolutely right, that the base of the Republican party drags potential nominees away from where they want to be. I just think that Romney was dragged quite far from where he should have been. I'll let the other guys talk, but the only disagreement I would have is that to the extent that Romney was damaged and flawed



entering the general election, I think the core of the flaw existed before the primary campaign ever started, which is the authenticity point I mentioned, which is, he's somebody who was pretending to be acceptable to a party that he didn't actually fit in, that didn't want him. It's just that the other candidates were so weak that he was going to win the nomination, and so I think problems of identity and fit with the party pre-existed the party.

MR. BALZ: I absolutely agree with that and I think the list that I just gave was, represents in many ways the things he was compelled to do.

MR. HARWOOD: Reflections of that.

MR. BALZ: Reflections of that.

MS. KAMARCK: I just want to make, on this point, one of my favorite pieces of reporting in the book, is Stu Stevens, Romney's top advisor, Dan has quoted him as saying, Elections are like high school, you are who you hang out with. And that was to this point of the damage done by the rest of the Republican party to a guy who, yes, didn't fit, but also then got damaged by association.

MR. GALSTON: Even if you're just the bartender in the Star Wars bar, you're still there.

MR. BALZ: Well that was Stewart's view of what happened as a result of the debates. That if you stand up on that stage for twenty

debates, with that cast of characters, it has an effect of how people perceive you. Even if you had done brilliantly, which as we know, he often did, but he had moments when he did not do well, and those stuck out.

MR. GALSTON: At any rate, here are my questions Dan.

MR. BALZ: Alright.

MR. GALSTON: Question 1. A couple of conventional political science maxims were pretty frontally challenged in this campaign. Maxim number 1: In elections involving incumbents, the real election campaign is primarily a referendum on the incumbent. And the question is, to what extent was that not true in 2012, because the Obama campaign labored mightily, and I think your judgment is, with some success, to shift from a referendum to a choice.

Conventional political science maxim number 2. After four years the incumbent owns the economy. Exit polls indicated that more than fifty percent of the people after casting their votes in 2012 still blame Bush more than Obama, so, you know, maybe that's not true either. So that's my first question, wither conventional political science after the 2012 election.

Here's my second question. I have long believed that politically and perhaps substantively as well, the single most important decision that the Obama folks made in the first six months was the auto

bailout. I don't think he could have won Ohio without the auto bailout.

There's great qualitative as well as quantitative research to support that point and I wonder whether he would have been nearly as strong in the Midwest absent the auto bailout. Query: if he'd done everything else the same but hadn't bailed out the auto industry, would it have been a different election. That's my second question.

Here's my third question. Within the Republican party, I think the key split is between main stream conservatism, which Romney represented, and conservative populism, which Santorum ended up representing. And you have a very interesting stat about states where Obama won, states where Romney won as opposed to the ones where Santorum won, the fifty percent Christian evangelical threshold, why wasn't there a stronger populace challenge to the establishment at the Presidential level? It's very strong as we know at the Congressional level. But this populace challenge within the Republican party is not a new story, it's been going on for a while, but no well-organized populace insurgency with some real intellectual political financial heft has really surfaced, why not?

Here's my fourth question. With regard to Obama, you make a series of very interesting points. First of all, that there was a contradiction at the heart of his first campaign in the way his first

administration, between the promise to transcend the politics and polarization on the one hand and the fact that he was a pretty traditional liberal on the other, and you talk about squaring the circle. You also argue and you have an interview with him to back this up, that verbally he made the standard new Democrat move, right, that the issue wasn't big government versus small government, smart government versus dumb government, but you point out that he failed to persuade the electorate that he was on the smart government side of that divide. You make the point that he has technocratic tendencies, that he tends to believe that if you get the smartest people in the room together and shut the door, they'll come up with the right answer and that right answer can then be sold to the rest of the country, and you also say that he had difficulty putting himself into the minds of his opposition, understanding not only what they believe but why they believe it, and how a person that wasn't really ignorant or evil could possibly believe those things. To what extent do those four features of Obama the President help explain the Obama presidency?

Here's my fifth question. And this is my fifth and final question. You make a fascinating point in the course of your discussion of the interaction between Romney and Chris Christie, where you have Christie getting off the phone and saying to someone, you won't believe

the conversation that I just had with Governor Romney, and it turned out the issue was SEC's pay to play regulation. And you argue that this very quietly, that this is sort of the ticking time bomb in the heart of campaigns that future governors might want to wage. Could you say a little bit more about that? I mean, that's just an extraordinary observation and nobody else has made it. So, finally, this is the first and probably the last time I'll be able to say this to the best political reporter I know, and that is, I think you buried the lead.

MR. HARWOOD: That is over the line.

MR. GALSTON: I know that. Well we live in polarized times. I'm permitted to go with the stylistic flow. In the middle of the book you report on Peter Hart's focus groups, with the middle class, and they weren't just talking about unemployment. They were talking about fear of the future, the sense that the old rules were broken down with nothing to replace them, their belief that their children wouldn't do as well as they did.

And then, in a paragraph on the very final page, you point out that nothing in the campaign said by either candidate focused in a productive or forward looking way, on this fear. People are interested, I'll read out loud that paragraph, but it's a wonderful paragraph, from which I would reach the following conclusion. If campaigns are supposed to lay the foundation for successful governments, that is to say, a successful

effort to grapple with the problems facing the country, then the 2012 election was a complete failure and we're paying the price. As college professors would say, discuss.

MS. KAMARCK: I have a question too, but I'm going to let Dan respond to these. I'm going to make a comment, and we're going to open it up, okay?

MR. BALZ: Alright. Well, as always, Bill has given me a smorgasbord of things to talk about, and provocatively so. Let me just tick down through them - the first one, the referendum on the President and the incumbent owning the economy. I can't fully explain why, in the exit polls in 2012, George Bush is still tagged at that level, other than that there was still antipathy towards George Bush, still a recognition that the seeds of all of that happened on his watch, that it was historically difficult for Obama to have to take on, and because in a sense, throughout all of this, Obama was a more likeable, was still a rather likeable President to people, even those who were disappointed in him. And so I think people tended to cut him a little slack on that.

MR. HARWOOD: Just one interjection. I think it's also possible that the response to that question, even though the question was about the economy, the response wasn't about the economy. That is to say, it was a response of identity, like which side you're on, and if you're

on, if politics is about cultural identification of whether you are on one side or the other, you're going to say Bush, whether or not the economy is the underlying source.

MR. BALZ: But it's even beyond – I mean, I agree with that completely, I mean, so much is shaped by whether people say if I'm a Republican or a Democrat, but I think on that particular issue, it went beyond that division, I mean it went beyond that and I think it was to some extent the slack that people still cut for Obama on that. The degree to which they avoided it being a referendum goes back to this point I made in my comments, which is, they recognize that if it were a referendum, they were in big trouble. And so, they created a message that completely ignored that. I mean, they did not want to ask people how do you feel about things today, or how about how do you feel about what the President did. They wanted it to be about which of these two candidates do you as a middle class voter have more confidence in to take care of you. Who understands you better?

And the second thing that they wanted to do was to disqualify Romney as a potentially good steward of the economy, which was his biggest calling card going in. I think the mystery is, and it's still not fully answered in the book, is why the Romney campaign was not more effective at rebutting that, why they were not more effective at filling in

some biographical portrait of Mitt Romney that made him a more warmer, more empathetic or more capable person to deal with the economy. So I think that in part, this was a situation, if you could say so, in contrast to what some political scientists might argue, campaigns really do matter. In framing that message and in the absence of a response, an effective response from the Romney campaign, they were able to make this less a referendum, a pure referendum on the President.

The auto bailout, I think your point is absolutely right. It is hard to believe that he would have done as well in Ohio as he did in the absence of the auto bailout. I mean, I remember taking a trip with the President across northern Ohio, it was around the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in 2012, and I was sharing a car with John Dickerson and his producer Sarah Boxer, and as we went across that we were talking about this and said, you know, this is the election. This is the entire election. It is the northern tier of Ohio, and it is the auto bailout. And if you reduce the whole election to one thing, this is it. And this is Obama's route in. And if you look at the exit polling, Obama did demonstrably better with white non college voters than he did nationally, by about 6 points. And I have to believe that a lot of that was, a share of that was the auto bailout, and a share of that was the disqualification, or the portraiture of Romney as the guy who closed factories, not as the guy that would create jobs.



MR. HARWOOD: The Thurston Howell factor.

MR. BALZ: Yes, the Thurston Howell factor.

MS. KARMARCK: And one interjection on that, Beth Meyers came to talk to one of my classes right after the election, and the failure to identify more accurately rebut the Obama argument here, they blame on having no money between May and their convention. They actually blame this on, they said we knew what was happening, we saw what Obama was doing to us in his ads in the swing states, and we had no money, we only could raise general election money. And so they have a response to it.

MR. HARWOOD: Yeah, well I have a response to that response, namely, why didn't they have their convention in July?

MS. KARMARCK: Well, that I think was the decision that was too, by that time, was done.

MR. BALZ: Well, everybody's playing the last word. Beth's absolutely right on the money piece of it. But I think it begs the question of, you know, all of the time period up until that point. They started an operation at the Romney headquarters, you know, in 2011, literally setting up the equivalent of a war room to deal with Bain. Bob White, who was Romney's business partner at Bain, and closest confidante in the campaign operation, knew every charge about Bain that was going to come at them. And they prepared all of the information. Of all of the things

that had happened at Bain, there were only a handful of things that the Obama campaign went after, maybe three or four. They knew they were going to get hit on these. They had gotten responses, they had done everything, and yet they never effectively, you know, engaged on that topic until they didn't have money to do it.

MR. HARWOOD: I want to go to two things. You were talking about the auto bailout and the working class thing. This gets back to the authenticity point that I was making, and I'll link it to a separate issue. Mitt Romney tried to make the argument in the campaign that he, that Obama implemented his plan for saving the auto industry, because ultimately they got to a managed bankruptcy for the auto companies. That was fake, not true, okay. So he was making an argument that was fundamentally not true.

He, in the fall of 2008, wrote this article with the headlines slapped on by my colleagues at the New York Times that said Let Detroit Go Bankrupt, but fundamentally said don't put a dime in these companies. That was in fact his message. And he was doing that a time when he was trying to gear up to appeal to, to surf the opinion in the base of the Republican Party against the bailouts that were going on in Washington. Well, that didn't look so good when he got to the general election and the economy in those states hadn't recovered. So inauthentic, fake, that made

it very difficult for him.

Secondly, we haven't talked about health care yet. That is the fundamental fake, sort of substantive fakery in his campaign. He enacted a health care plan sort of before he recognized how unpopular it was in Massachusetts, that essentially is identical to Obama's healthcare plan. Then when he's running for President, he's running around the country pretending that Obama's healthcare plan is the worst thing ever, and the first day in office he's going to get rid of it. And I remember being at an off the record session with Romney early in the campaign and said, how are you going to deal with this fundamental issue of having to implemented Obama's healthcare plan which your party base hates, and he said, my healthcare plan wasn't like Obama's healthcare plan, I didn't cut Medicare. Well of course you didn't cut Medicare because governors don't control Medicare. But in the core of what the plan is, it's the same plan. Now, yes, there is a difference between a state level plan and a federal plan. And you can make a Federal as an argument and Republicans tend to make those arguments when the thing is popular nationally, but they are trying to square the circle.

I remember Lamar Alexander trying to do that on abortion in 1996. It was like, well, I'm completely pro-life and no abortion but it's not a Federal issue so he was going to try to lead the issue that way. Romney

tried to do that the whole year and nobody believed it. It's kind of preposterous when you think about it.

MS. KAMARCK: Good. Picking up, and then we'll get to you in a minute. So get your questions ready.

MR. BALZ: Let me quickly address the Christie pay to play issue. This is a totally, I mean, I had no idea this provision existed. It in essence says that if you are an employee in a financial institution that does bond work in a state or with city, you can't contribute to the campaign of anybody that has some control over the bond, who gets awarded bond underwriting. This affects sitting governors who are running for President. This had existed before but between 2008 and 2012 the SEC stepped in and broadened it, and it became an issue about whether Christie could be on the ticket with Romney. Romney was fine because he was an ex-governor. Christie was a sitting governor, and there was a question about whether if they put him on the ticket, could they raise money on Wall Street if he were part of it, and would they have to give money back that they had already raised. They decided that that wasn't a problem. So Romney called Christie at one point to talk about this. In the end, he picked Paul Ryan, not because of pay to play, but for other issues. But nonetheless it is a potential issue for any governor who wants to run in 2016 including Chris Christie.

MR. HARWOOD: And there are a lot of Republican governors.

MR. BALZ: And there are a lot of Republican governors. When I talked to Rick Perry's campaign about this, they said they ran into that problem when he was starting out his candidacy and looked for ways around it and concluded there was no way around it, and basically said we had to shut down fundraising in New York. And that's 4 or 5 million dollars. Now Perry could raise a lot of money elsewhere because of his Texas roots, and as it turned out he didn't need much money. Or put it in another way, all the money in the world might not have done anything better for him.

MS. KARMARCK: For those of you who haven't read the book Dan's title of the chapter on Rick Perry – Oops.

MR. HARWOOD: Thank you for doing that.

MR. BALZ: John's key moment in the campaign. He blames you John for his demise.

MR. HARWOOD: He's very good natured about it though.

MR. BALZ: Actually, actually just a footnote on that, he thinks that that is not where his campaign fell apart. He thinks that his campaign was basically already in a downward spiral before that oops moment, and I think he's absolutely correct.

MR. HARWOOD: He's correct on that.

MR. BALZ: Let me embrace or try to talk about two other things Bill raised. One is the question of the President and in a sense, his leadership style. There's a quote in this, there are two things in this book that I wanted to highlight.

One is a conversation I had with the President some years ago, asking him, I said, who gave you the best, as you were making that final decision to run in the 2008 campaign, which would have been in the fall, late fall of 2006. I said, who gave you the best advice? And he paused for a moment, and he said, well I think it would have to be the advice I gave myself. Now, that quotation was in the 2008 book that Haynes and I did. It attracted absolutely no comment. People have seen it in this book and it's like a light bulb went on, because people obviously see the President differently today than they saw him immediately after the 2008 election. They watched him govern, and so they recognize the degree to which he really is a singular kind of figure and relies so much on himself.

And this notion of him saying, again, back in late 2008, it's an issue of, it's not an issue of big government or small government, it's an issue of smart government, and A) you can make the argument that he has not successfully made the argument for smart government, or even some version of bigger government, but B) I think the President obviously

went through an evolution in the first four years of his presidency, and, you know, there was one period that goes through August 2011, which is when the debt ceiling negotiations collapsed, in which he still held out hope that there was an opportunity to work with the Republicans. And in the moment that happened he made the pivot. Now he made the pivot for campaign political reasons at that point, which was, alright, we have to take this argument to the country. I can't sit in a room with John Boehner or anybody else and work this out. The Republicans, you know, Boehner can't get his people to come along, so I've got to take this fight to the country, and that's when they made the pivot and did the middle class message. I think once he got re-elected, he thought, as all Presidents do, that he had a greater mandate than he actually did coming out of 2012.

But nonetheless, he's operated since the second inaugural more like that person who made the pivot than the person who wanted to go back and negotiate. So on the one hand he's tried to negotiate with the Republicans, more recently he has tried to since argue I won this election, this is where the country is, you all will pay a price. Neither has worked very successfully. So now we're in a period where there's once again a re-evaluation of the President's leadership style. I think this is going to be an enduring discussion and debate all the way through his Presidency.

Finally the last point you make about me burying the lead.

The point is right, and I wrote that paragraph at the end as a way to kind of highlight it. This ultimately is, this book is a narrative history, it's not an argument about some aspect of policy, but I think that's right. I think that for all the focus that Obama put on the middle class, neither he nor Romney came up with policies that were particularly fresh, innovative or that they sold to the country. And so, what we've seen

MR. HARWOOD: Did he just confess to burying the lead?

MR. KAMARCK: I think he might have.

MR. BALZ: So what we've seen

MR. GALSTON: I think he said it was the lead in a different book.

MR BALZ: You know in a narrative history, you put the lead toward the end, Bill; it's a construct that we journalists are familiar with. You have to leave people with a sense of where you want them to think it came out. But, you know, the President will episodically will, or his people will say well he's now going to get back to the middle class issue, and he does this with events, and he'll go out to the country and have an event to try to highlight that focus, but I think it's a measure of in a sense a kind of a stagnation of the policy debate that has existed and it's a complicated question of how you deal not simply with stimulating the economy more rapidly than it has shown over the last several years, but the even bigger



problem of income stagnation or regression income in inequality. I mean, these are huge issues and the question is which party as you go to 2016, may try to push the envelope in a fresh and new way.

MS. KAMARCK: And so I'm going to make one quick comment on this and then I'll go to you, which is, the subtitle of this book kind of gets to this last point. It's the future of elections in America, not the future of America, right? It's the future of elections in America. And you set up an interesting contrast between all the new technology, all the new things. It was the first election under Citizens United. It was the first election under the end of the collapse of the public finance system. It was the first election where debates turn into, and I'm quoting Dan here, reality TV, and get enormous amount of attention. It was the first election where there's this extraordinary emphasis on not just the new technologies but the analytic which you describe beautifully.

So there's almost a turning point in elections and there's such a contrast between the turning point in elections and the absence in a turning point in any policy ideas or anything like that. And I'm wondering, having established this new technology, and I'll say that broadly, to include the new mode of elections, will everyone now do that? Does that then, is there now going to be a level playing field on that? Did Obama in 2012 have the first mover advantage technologically, and from now on that

won't matter because everyone else is going to catch up?

MR. BALZ: Well, the short answer is probably, but with a couple of caveats. What the Obama campaign was able to do in building this machine, was as a result of literally five years of working, or five and a half years of working. It started in 2007. They broke some ground in 2008 with what they did and then they never stopped. They moved over to the DNC and began experimenting with analytics and they did after action report on what had worked and what had not worked in 2008. All of this was moving and they had, when they went out to Chicago in 2011, they had an idea of what they needed to do and the time and money to do it. Romney's operation, there was no way Romney's operation could keep up with that, unless the RNC already had off the shelf stuff, and as we know that's never sufficient.

MR. HARWOOD: But for the same reason, didn't Ken Melman and Carl Rogue do precisely the same thing so that in the 2004 campaign, people said, wow, they're so much better.

MR. BALZ: This ebbs and flows. Somebody gets an advantage, and the other side goes to school on it and a smart candidate overtakes the other side. But I think that the techniques that we saw will become standard practice in 2016.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay, let's take a couple questions, right

here, this young lady.

SPEAKER: Hi, good morning. My name is Kristen Cabrow and I was wondering why there was no reporting of the down ticket races, not only the US Senate but the US House. And I ask because I was the Democrat running for the US House in the swing district in battleground Virginia, just about ten miles away. I was the only Congressional candidate running for the Democrats running in the bell weather Lowden County as well as Prince William and Fairfax Counties, and let me tell you, that those matrixes out of Chicago brought my old classmate Barack Obama to my district quite a few times. I think focusing on these top marquis races tells less than half the story. I also disagree with you that the ground game was just important because it was decisive as was the demographics in a battleground state like Virginia. And then finally, when it came to the lead, that was my campaign.

I would say in speeches that if your government is not creating conditions to make it easier to put a roof over your head, food in the kids' mouth and on the table, and clothes on your back, then your government is broken, needs fixing and put me in there. And on no time and no money, as the accidental candidate, I have the second best performance in 25 years. There you go.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. We'll take a couple of questions and

then let Dan respond to everyone. Yeah, right there.

SPEAKER: How do you account for Romney, you heard Romney up until Election Day, he was absolutely confident that he was going to be elected. What was the source of this confidence and what ever became of the binders build with women?

MS. KAMARCK: And then let's have this question right here, and then you can remember three at once, right?

MR. BALZ: I think so.

SPEAKER: My name is Ann Denoti. I'm a consultant. I have a question about electability. Is it the case that in spite of all the flaws you all discussed, Governor Romney was nonetheless the most electable, or the least unelectable candidate presented to the Republicans, and when you spoke to him in January, did you get the sense Governor Romney felt his running mate had added to the electability of the platform, or otherwise.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay, let's let Dan respond and then I'll take a couple more.

MR. BALZ: First question's a fair question. For me to tell the Presidential story and then try to tell the down ballot is impossible, frankly.

MS. KAMARCK: Then the book would be this big.

MR. BALZ: Well, or it would be so superficial. You know,

Ron Brownstein and I did a book after the '94 election that looked at the consequence of a mid-term election. But this is the story of a Presidential election. So I can understand your frustration, but there are human limits for an author doing this.

Romney's confidence was misplaced. Now, I mean, and in a sense, not necessarily misplaced at the beginning. Stewart Stevens was a sort of conceptual person for the thinking about what this election, how this election would unfold and the view was fairly straightforward – bad economy, high unemployment, Presidential approval below fifty percent, all those ingredients add up to a situation where the people are ready to vote out the incumbent. What Romney had to do was to demonstrate or gain people's confidence that he could do a better job on the economy and that in the end people would turn to him. So, A) that was plausible at the beginning, but as the election moved along and as we saw things happen, it became more challenging for them to do that. But when I say that their confidence was misplaced, it was either a willful or blind view of willful misunderstanding or blind view of the electorate that they were actually going to be dealing with.

I think the Romney campaign made two fatal assumptions. One was that the electorate, as we've said, with each Presidential election, the share of the electorate of white voters has ticked down, still

by far the dominant share, but it has ticked down election by election. The Romney campaign convinced themselves that that would not be the case this time, that it would probably stay where it had been in 2008 at 74 percent, as opposed to 72 percent, which was what the, you know, when I talked with Jim Messina about this in the spring of 2012, and said, you know, tell me what the electorate's going to be, he said it would be 72 percent white, 28 percent nonwhite. So the Romney made that misassumption.

The second misassumption that they made was that the percentage of Republicans versus Democrats would be closer to 2010 than to 2008. They were of the belief that the 2010 election signaled that there was a change in the composition in 2012 that was brewing. And this was driven home to them in the final weeks of the campaign, when after the Denver debate he began to get, not just big crowds but extraordinarily enthusiastic crowds, of the type that he had not seen earlier in the campaign. We know that most of the energy in the Republican space was about getting rid of Obama, not because they loved Mitt Romney.

And in the final weeks, as he said to me, it went from being clinical to emotional, which is his way of saying, they didn't just want to get rid of Barack Obama, they wanted to elect me. And we've all seen losing campaigns at the end that have big crowds and enthusiastic crowds.

MR. GALSTON: The caucus had excellent crowds at the end.

MR. BALZ: Yeah. And it is easy; it is easy for a candidate to lose focus. But the whole campaign got swept up in that, so that is why.

MR. GALSTON: Just one quick interjection. There's a direct connection between 74 percent versus 72 percent, what the partisan balance is, who's a Democratic and who's a Republican.

MS. KAMARCK: Yes. That's exactly right.

MR. BALZ: As to the question of was Romney the most electable of the Republican candidates, I mean if you look at that field, ultimately, yes. Now, one of the things I did is I ended up doing two chapters on the people who didn't run. And would the idea of, if certain other people had run, would Mitt Romney have been the nominee. People like Hayley Barber or Mitch Daniels, Mike Huckabee, Tim Pawlenty and Chris Christie. Romney said to me, one of his early doubts about whether he should even run, was the question of Am I the strongest Republican to go against President Obama? And this was a question he had in 2010 as he was looking at this race. And he said if somebody like Jeb Bush had run, he might not have run, because he thought Bush would be a more effective candidate to go against the President. Once he saw the field as it shaped up, he decided he was clearly the class of the field and would be

the strongest. So did they put up their best candidate, no. Rick Perry had the best line of all when he came to the grid iron dinner in the spring of 2012 and he said I ran against the weakest Republican field ever and they kicked my butt. So it was not a strong Republican field, and in that sense, you could say that Romney was the most presentable in that group.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay, let's go here and here and here.

MR. BALZ: Oh, I'm sorry, the Ryan question. I think he thinks he made the right decision with Ryan. He liked Ryan, he admired Ryan, he liked the idea that they could try to make the election about the deficit. I don't think they effectively were able to do that. I don't think he had any second thoughts about Ryan.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay, let's see. One, two and three. You can do three again?

MR. BALZ: Sure.

SPEAKER: I'm Gary Tiron with Community Action Partnership. Dan, per Romney's 47 percent comment, what is your assessment about the subsequent response from that in influencing the President's policies?

MS. KAMARCK: Great.

SPEAKER: Thanks very much, I'm Garrett Mitchell and I



write the Metro Report and I'm also the only person apparently who got Elaine's memo today about green slacks and orange on the feet. It's fascinating to me, we're in the closing moments about a discussion about Mitt Romney and the word Mormon has not surfaced, and I thought I'd do that, and I want to do it in this way.

One of the most remarkable features, I believe, and I gather you frame that in your book, is about the inauthenticity of this man. One wonders what the basis for that might be and where that might come from. In August of 2012, the New Yorker did a book review, of four books on Mormonism, that was quite fascinating, one of which, and two of these books were written by Mormons, or three, reports on the day when, and I'm not sure what the title is, but the highest official in the Mormon Church declared that African Americans were now admitted, allowed to become part of the church, and he was asked at that conference by a reporter who had attended a session 3 months earlier, where that same grand official said, in regards to the question, over my dead body. And the reporter asked the grand official of the Mormon, how do you explain that three months ago it was over his dead body and today it is with conviction that he endorses the notion that African Americans are now part of the church. And he explains that a basic principle of Mormonism is the belief that, in Revelation, that when a Revelation comes along, it erases, it's like etch a

sketch, it erases everything else that comes before. And I wondered two questions about Mormonism. One is, was it such a third rail issue that really nobody in the media explored that much, wrote about that much, which probably would not have been the case if he had been a Scientologist for example, and second, to any extent do you think that something like the strictures of his Mormon faith often made it difficult for him to speak with a not forked tongue about the issues of Medicare and others, excuse me, the healthcare plan and others. So I'm really looking for whether you saw in any way that it had issue of his faith imposing on his ability to speak plainly and second, I'm also interested in why that the subject of Mormonism simply was verboten in the press.

MS. KAMARCK: Over here.

SPEAKER: Thank you. My name is Sebastian. I'm here with the Danish Embassy here in D.C. Thank you first of all. My question goes to the future elections in America, and specifically 2016, and I'd like you to elaborate a little bit on the likeability of the candidate versus the demographic changes that we're seeing. You say that the demographics are trending Democratic and maybe even more so than we thought in 2010, so let's assume that the GOP nominates a generally electable candidate, I know that's a big assumption but let's do that, and how much would it take for, let's again assume, a Hillary Clinton, to recreate the

connection with the voters. I'm asking how much work would she do in order to be likeable versus how much would she get for free from demographic changes trending the way of her policy positions.

MS. KAMARCK: Great.

MR. BALZ: Okay. 47 percent and how it may have affected the President's policies – 47 percent you could argue was the crystallizing moment and therefore sunk Mitt Romney, I think there are lots of other things that ultimately contributed to his defeat, but there was no single moment that sort of summed up the case against Mitt Romney that the Obama campaign had been trying to make, that this was somebody who was out of touch with the average person, insensitive to them. I can't see that it had much affect in terms of policy that the administration has done. They say it's done politically but I don't think it's carried beyond that other than to frame some of the arguments about the Republican economics. So I would leave that at that.

The question of Mormonism is a great question. I did not deal with it in any significant way in the book, in part because I did not think that in the end that it was decisive in any way. But I'll say a couple of things about it. Romney was certainly aware of that being a potential obstacle for him, particularly in winning the nomination. He said to me, and Stewart Stevens said it to people all throughout the campaign, he said,

Stewart always said to me, this is not going to be an easy nomination to win for these reasons. This is a Southern based party, you're a Northerner. This is an Evangelical based party, you're a Mormon. This is a very conservative based party, you're, in Stewart's words, you're a conservative, but you're a conservative from Massachusetts. I think that they were unwilling to talk about religion in any way. And I think that that became a problem in this regard. If you watch the Republican convention on the last night, if you watched not in prime time, you saw an elderly couple come out and talk about how Mitt Romney had taken their son under his wing when their son was dying of cancer at age 14, as I recall. And it was a poignant story that said a lot about Mitt Romney that the campaign had never been able to say or never chosen to say about him. You never saw those people in an advertisement. The only time you did, was something that American Crossroads, Carl Rhodes' group, put up toward the end of the campaign. These were people from his church. He knew this young man and this couple from his church. It tells you so much that they, for whatever reason they decided they couldn't go near that, or wouldn't go near that and the question is, is it simply because it would have drawn attention to the fact that he was Mormon. I don't know the answer to that; they give more complicated reasons for why they didn't do it, but at any rate.

MR. HARWOOD: It was a big mistake.

MS. KAMARCK: Well, yeah and I was going to ask, you seem to be brazing on the Mormon question on authenticity issue and I want to hear John's reaction to that.

MR. HARWOOD: The reason I say it was a big mistake is that that was an authentic part of his character and it was buried. And I, you know, like you, there's a gamble, right. It's an evangelical party, it's a southern party, and Mormonism is not popular among southern evangelicals, fair enough. But especially running against a weak field, you've got to make some gambles and take some calculated risks, and even if you did it after the primary, my point is, the more ways you, my point is, Americans like people of faith, period. And so I think the faith part trumps the whatever negatives exist with the Mormon part, and the authenticity, this is who Mitt Romney is deep down, I think that would have benefitted him more than they recognized.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay.

MR. BALZ: And 2016. And Hillary Clinton. Obviously demographics are powerful, but a candidate has to present him or herself in an attractive and appealing way. And the idea that any Democrat can simply ride the waves of demographic change or whatever in 2016 I think is folly. It's not easy for a political party to win 3 consecutive elections.

There may be Obama fatigue by the time we get to 2016. We don't know what the country's judgment will be about, we really need a big change, and so I think any Democrat, whether it's Secretary Clinton or anybody else who may run, has got to come up with a way to make A) a presentable argument about the future and to make themselves as appealing and likeable as they can.

MR. GALSTON: And just ask yourselves as a matter of identity, African Americans actually turned out at higher rates than whites did in the 2012 election. Is Martin O'Malley, if he's the Democratic nominee, is that electricity going to exist that fuels turnout like that? No. Hillary Clinton might, but it's not automatic.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay we have room for one more last question, and I neglected the back but, ah, yes, all the way back there.

SPEAKER: Obviously the Republicans paid a lot of attention to the turnout issue and so they've been busy wrenching down on days of voting, voter ID, that kind of thing. Looking forward, do you think that the Republican squeeze on election day voting and other things, do you think that will, clearly they're trying to offset the demographic changes. Do you think, given the widespread tactics they're engaged in, do you think that will have an effect in 2016?

MR. BALZ: Well, I think there's certainly a potential for a

back lash against that. A) A smart campaign and a good campaign will figure out how to maximize the number of days available to get people to the polls. If it's fewer than it was, a good campaign will figure out how to deal with that as best they can. But having said that, I think that efforts to restrict or cut back or in any way make it look like you're making it more difficult for people to vote comes with a political consequence on the other side. I think we saw some of that in 2012.

I think that John's right. The enthusiasm for Obama and the African American Community was in part because racial identity. But I also think it was because in part, we're not going to let that, we're not going to let the other side to make it more difficult, and we saw these huge lines down in Florida for the early vote, and I think that's a recognition. When you talk to the Obama team about the African American vote in particular, they said there was almost a palpable sense of we've got his back, and we'll do that. Now, you know, is that transferable to any other candidate, not necessarily. But nonetheless, this is a politically charged debate that's going on about the terms under which states hold elections. For every push in one direction, there can be a push in the other.

MR. HARWOOD: It's a dead end strategy.

MS. KAMARCK: I want to thank so much John Harwood with CNBC and the New York Times, Bill Galston from Brookings for coming to

help us discuss and celebrate Collision 2012, and I want to remind everyone that there are books for sale out there, and Dan's going to stick around and sign books, so please get one, you're going to have a lot of fun with it. Thank you very much.

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

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