



Mom's Best Advice: How Candidates Who Didn't Run as Themselves Lost the Message War

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Mom's Best Advice: How Candidates Who Didn't Run as Themselves Lost the Message War

By Melinda Henneberger
Shorenstein Fellow, Spring 2013
Political writer, *The Washington Post*

Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS • POLITICS



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Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

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At San Francisco's Cow Palace in July of 1964, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater accepted his party's presidential nomination in a way that made clear he would not spend that fall dashing to the political center: "I would remind you," he said, in a speech that famously inspired Ronald Reagan, "that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" and "moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Supposedly, a reporter covering the speech remarked, "My God, he's going to run as Barry Goldwater!"

That well-known quote is probably apocryphal, according to Lou Cannon, who covered the '64 race for Pine Bluff (Ark.) Commercial and was in the hall for the speech. "There was never any doubt that Goldwater was going to run as Goldwater," Cannon said. "Say what you want about Barry, but he was not a dissembler. Furthermore, he understood very well that he was not going to be president. As he later said, the country wasn't ready to have three presidents in the space of 18 months, and he had no illusion he could beat LBJ, of whom he had a far lower opinion than he had of JFK, whom he had expected to face" that year.

Though the coverage of the race may have left a lot to be desired, with reporters endlessly repeating LBJ's charge that Goldwater would lead us into war even as LBJ planned a massive escalation in Vietnam, the electoral outcome was no surprise to the press or the nominees themselves: "Goldwater really had accomplished his goal of transforming his party when he won the nomination and wasn't about to throw that away with a weasel-worded campaign," Cannon said. "So if anyone really said that Goldwater was going to run as Goldwater as if it were a surprise, he just hadn't been paying attention."

We all know how "running as Goldwater" turned out: exactly the way running as George McGovern did eight years later. But though taking Mom's advice to "be yourself" guarantees nothing in political life, campaigns that obscure or ignore core attributes or passions do hurt presidential candidates. With the abundance of data available now, it's easy to lose sight of the overarching reality that otherwise competitive

presidential races often turn on trust. “This is the age of authenticity,” says former Bill Clinton and Al Gore aide Chris Lehane, who speaks often about how the few candidates who show some are rewarded by voters. But as Lynn Vavreck writes in *The Message Matters*, which describes how candidates can and do over- or under-perform what you’d expect based on the economy, “We have missed the forest for the trees — so many trees” and paid “so little attention to the forest.” And most candidates, in Lehane’s experience, wind up with a classic forest-for-the-trees problem: “They’re handcuffed by having almost too much research data, and Gore was a perfect example of that.”

Something as broad, basic and old-fashioned as trust is often neglected by campaigns obsessed with the speed and specificity made possible by new technology. Modern-day media campaigns essentially follow the political equivalent of the strategies described in Michael Lewis’s 2003 book *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, which describes how the traditional intuitive and even statistical approaches to appraising players have been supplanted by “sabermetric” analytics that exploit previously undervalued strengths, like on-base percentage, to get an edge over even rivals with deeper pockets. Today, every subject line in a donor email is poll-tested, every image and word released by campaigns at the presidential level is not only manufactured, but insofar as possible, delivered directly to voters, many of whom see no advantage, either, in receiving political messages through a “media filter.” There are dangers, though, in losing sight of the bigger picture while micro-targeting ever narrower demographic groups with ever greater precision.

In fact, in that 2000 race and in every one since, the candidate seen as “comfortable in his skin” has moved into the White House, and the one cast as “inauthentic” or untrue to himself in some central way has not. With such a divided electorate, of course, any number of factors could be said to have made the difference in these races. In the 2000 race, Gore adviser Mike Feldman jokes that with the White House decided by just 537 votes, even one more radio ad in Miami might have changed the outcome.

Yet though the tools and major players in the message war have changed dramatically in the last dozen years, this much has not changed: In each of the last four races, one candidate has been tagged as the phony, and in each case, that candidate has underperformed on the message front and in the race as a whole.

Again, this is one factor of many, but that such a basic tenet of political presentation has been repeatedly underestimated — by Al Gore in 2000, John Kerry in '04, John McCain in '08 and Mitt Romney in '12 — strikes me as not just odd but unconscionable, given the stakes.

How does it happen? And even if the campaigns of those tagged as the phonies in these races somehow had another shot, would they present their candidates any differently? The short answer seems to be, not necessarily.

Al Gore: “What you have here is a tendency to exaggerate.”

When Gore’s new book, *The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change* came out this year, he gave a series of interviews in which he disparaged the press for paying so little attention to climate change in the '12 campaign cycle: Last year “was the hottest year in American history,” he told NPR. “Sixty-one percent of our country was in extreme drought. It knocked a full percentage point off our GDP. The largest record fires in the west, the largest West Nile virus outbreak ever, \$110 billion in climate-related disaster damage including, of course, Superstorm Sandy which devastated parts of this city and New Jersey and Long Island. And yet, in spite of that, with more presidential campaign debates than ever in history, not a single journalist asked a single question [about climate change to] any of the candidates in any of the debates.”

What he didn’t mention, though, is that he himself ran for president without talking much about that topic, either — years after he wrote the best-selling environmental manifesto *Earth in the Balance*, which came out in 1992.

Throughout his 2000 presidential campaign, Gore failed to show the best part of himself, in ways that he had specifically promised he would do in *Earth in the Balance*.

In that campaign, he seemed hobbled by post-Monica anger at Bill Clinton — and not incidentally, the anger of his wife and daughters. And he reverted to a campaign mode so cautious that he took his aides' advice and rarely raised the issue he'd already called the animating mission of his life.

In *Earth in the Balance*, he'd promised that he would never again run a campaign driven by polls and consultants. Nor, he'd said, would he run without putting the environment front and center.

After losing his first presidential run, in 1988, "I began to take stock, but didn't really know how to do it," he told me in an interview in 2000. "It was obvious to me I had a lot of growing to do, yet I channeled my feeling into the global environmental crisis and addressing it."

That spring, in April of 1989, his young son Albert III nearly died after being hit by a car, and Gore blamed himself, in part because he had been holding the boy's hand before he broke free, ran into traffic — and made it across two lanes before he was struck by a '77 Chevy and thrown 20 feet. "I had him" and let go, he kept telling a former aide. "I had him."

The book he wrote amid all this soul searching traced his journey from calculation to authenticity and from poll-tested themes to full-throated environmentalism — two arcs he saw as interwoven: "The harder truth" about his '88 campaign, he wrote, "is that I simply lacked the strength to keep on talking about the environmental crisis constantly, whether it was being reported in the press or not."

As if to make sure that never happened again, the book was confessional, and sure to be used against him when — not if — he ran for president again. In ways certain to be

snickered at, he even connected the dots between family dysfunction and our dysfunctional relationship with the planet. “I began to doubt my own political judgment” in the 1988 campaign, he wrote, “so I began to ask the pollsters and professional politicians what they thought I ought to talk about. As a result, for much of the campaign I discussed what everybody else discussed, which too often was a familiar list of what the insiders agree are ‘the issues.’ “

While writing the book, he handed out a number of copies of *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, by Alice Miller, about how the high-achieving children of narcissistic parents can lose track of their authentic desires while trying so hard to please.

“A developing child in a dysfunctional family,” he wrote, “searches his parent’s face for signals that he is whole and all is right with the world; when he finds no such approval, he begins to feel that something is wrong inside. And because he doubts his worth and authenticity, he begins controlling his inner experience — smothering spontaneity, masking emotion, diverting creativity into robotic routine.”

In swearing off “finger-to-the-wind” politics, he went so far as to recommend the retirement of the internal combustion engine. “I believe deeply that true change is possible,” he wrote, “only when it begins inside the person who is advocating it. Mahatma Gandhi said it well: ‘We must be the change we wish to see in the world.’“

When he ran again, though, he again underplayed his core issue, and ignored all of his own advice.

One afternoon in 2000, at a Nashville diner with his top aides, I asked them why, amid constant complaints that their guy wasn’t authentic, he hadn’t tried proving them wrong by talking about his favorite subject — global warming, as we called it then. They didn’t hold back, and said the notion that he ought to talk more about the environment, which — duh — as anyone who could read a poll knew was not top of mind for voters, then or ever, was flat out hilarious. In fact, they told me, it was *thirteenth* on the list of voter

concerns — thirteenth! When I continued to press, they reminded me it wasn't as if he'd never mentioned the subject, and cited a speech he'd given on Earth Day.

Of course, Gore did win the popular vote, and a slew of factors contributed to a showing that made Florida's hanging chads more important than they should have been: He should have spent more time in his home state of Tennessee, and in West Virginia, which he ignored entirely until the home stretch, when it was too late. Then there was the presidential debate in which Gore showed up looking orange, sighed loudly and at one point looked like he was charging his opponent. ("We told him, 'Don't react, don't fight with the moderator, and don't invade [George W. Bush's] space,' and it was like we'd given him a to-do list," says Bob Shrum.) But in a presidential race as tight as they all are now, failing to show what drives Albert Arnold Gore, Jr. was no trivial matter. And it's something he didn't have to be Gandhi to have changed.

Mike Feldman, who was one of Gore's advisers, insists that the vice president did talk about the environment in that race, "but those were not the issues being discussed, and if you're not addressing the news of the day, then you're not in the race. It would be a mistake to say he didn't talk about it, but you can't go out and talk about environmental security and the future of the planet" all the time and remain competitive, either.

He's among those who feel that Gore still doesn't get the credit he deserves for running against a fresh face with an appealingly blank slate — and a press corps with a serious case of Clinton fatigue. He points to the fact that their guy was mostly covered by White House reporters, while the challenger's plane was filled with reporters who were easier to impress because many more of them were covering their first presidential race.

It's true that the coverage was far harder on Gore, and gave Bush such generous credit that we seemed to suffer from the soft bigotry of low expectations. But it's also true that, for whatever reason, the Gore team made little effort to charm the reporters who covered him. As Roger Simon wrote in his book about the campaign, *Divided We Stand*:

How Al Gore Beat George Bush and Lost the Presidency, the narrative from pretty early on was Dumbo versus Pinocchio, and the guy perceived as the wooden fibber suffered far more from the characterization.

Inside the campaign, there was a divide over whether Gore should speak out about the environment, and Chris Lehane was on the losing end of that discussion: “You’re hitting on a very sensitive issue; I don’t want to question others, but it very much depends on your view of what campaigns are about, and mine is that these are ultimately character tests, up or down votes on who voters trust the most, or in some cases, trust the least.” The environment never “should have been looked at as, ‘It’s 13th on the list’ — and by the way, there was no real number-one issue in that campaign. Talking about an issue where there was clear passion and a history of taking on an issue well before it was popular would have been both a sword and a shield. If there’s something you care about enormously, people connect with you” as a result, whether or not they share your intensity on that specific issue.

When Gore did speak about climate change, “he opened up,” Lehane says, and lit up in the same way he did whenever his children were around. Since the election, the consultant said he’s heard the vice president himself say he wish he’d done more of that.

But when polling showed that the issue voters cared about most was protecting Social Security — in a good economy and before 9/11, 13 percent said that’s what mattered to them most — that’s what Gore focused on. But that 13 percent were mostly Democratic voters already. And the proof that endlessly repeating his stock phrase about putting Social Security into a protective “lockbox” was forest-for-the-trees thinking was that focus groups of ads on that topic regularly reflected the kind of week Gore was having in the media. “When Gore was having a good week or two, they responded favorably,” Lehane says, “and when the narrative was about authenticity, those same ads bombed.”

Pew polling showed that while more voters agreed with Gore on the issues, and saw Gore as more qualified to be president, too, 45 percent to 38 percent, it was Bush they saw as more honest and trustworthy, 43 percent to 32 percent in the last survey before Election Day, and more personally likable, 48 percent to 39 percent.

Not too surprisingly, the Bush team sees that race as about trust also, though their secret motto was, “Times are great; vote for change!” Temperamentally, their candidate was just the opposite of the introverted, intellectual Gore, an unstudied natural who “trusted his gut” in ways that helped him enormously on the stump, though that confidence was often less beneficial, to him and to us, during his eight years in office.

“He was very consistent, and that always helped me” in knowing how to answer for him, said his former adviser Karen Hughes. “In general, when people do things that are sincere and motivated by their instincts, it helps you politically.”

That isn’t to say that to Bush’s down-home appeal hadn’t to some extent been cultivated; after he lost his first race, for Congress, to an opponent who made fun of the fact that he jogged — what a Yankee! — in the Texas heat, he swore he’d never be “out-Texased” again, and he wasn’t, even if he had to clear all the brush from Crawford to Waxahachie to prove it. Nor was he unscripted in early interviews; in fact, when I interviewed him in New Hampshire in 1999, he repeated one of the several answers he’d memorized word-for-word, no matter what I asked him. But he did come across as “real,” and “down-to-earth,” and he did assume some short-term political risk in making himself so accessible to the press. (On how both presidential nominees were far stingier with that access in ’12, Karen Hughes has one question: “How did they get away with that?”)

The general feeling that Bush was “real” without any question helped him with reporters, whose positive coverage led to more access, which in turn led to still more positive coverage. “He’s a people person — that’s part of his nature — and [he] enjoyed chewing the fat with them,” Hughes said — until, that is, Laura Bush complained that

he looked silly hanging out with a bunch of news people. “Mrs. Bush said, ‘Karen, Al Gore is on TV in front of adoring crowds and George is on TV on the back of the plane talking to reporters.’ She was right, and at that point we started limiting it.” The dividends of all that chumminess, however, lasted throughout the campaign and beyond.

“John Kerry, reporting for duty.”

Four years later, John Kerry was dinged in essentially the same way, as a phony. As in 2000, both nominees were saddled with narrative negatives: Kerry was a flip-flopper, committed only to his own advancement, and Bush was still Dumbo, but less adorably so since the war in Iraq had gone so wrong. But, just as four years earlier, it was the “inauthentic” tag that proved far more damaging.

At the Democratic National Convention in Boston in '04, the nominee stepped to the microphone and said, “I’m John Kerry, and I’m reporting for duty.”

As a soldier in Vietnam, he said, “We fought for this nation because we loved it, and we came back with the deep belief that every day is extra. We may be a little older, we may be a little grayer, but we still know how to fight for our country.”

Problem was, he ran as a fighter who then didn’t fight, on two major fronts.

When he was “Swiftboated,” and his military service was not just questioned but flatly lied about, his campaign did some polling that said the matter wasn’t much of an issue for voters — and thus, was nothing to which he needed to respond. But by playing it safe — and again, sheathing the best part of a man who, when he got back from Vietnam had dared to ask the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Who’s going to be the last man to die for a mistake?” — he let a negative impression go from not much of an issue to a very big issue indeed.

It wasn't so much that the public believed the lies as that they wondered whether, if he wouldn't fight for himself, he would fight for them.

He really did, as he'd said in his nominating speech, "know what kids go through when they're carrying an M-16 in a dangerous place, and they can't tell friend from foe. I know what they go through when they're out on patrol at night and they don't know what's coming around the next bend. I know what it's like to write letters home telling your family that everything's all right, when you're not sure that that's true."

Only, he'd "reported for duty" without the righteous anger that first brought him to the national stage, as a young veteran appearing before the Senate committee he later chaired.

Pushing back against the Swiftboat attacks would have been not just defensive, but a great opportunity to say, Okay, President Bush and Vice President Cheney and I all graduated from college in the Vietnam era, so let's *do* have a conversation about our various choices then, and what it cost each of us. Let's *do* talk about who put his life on the line. Instead, he let Bush and Cheney talk tough while he walked away from the fight. And without question, his low-risk approach weakened him.

"I defended this country as a young man, and I will defend it as president," he said at his convention. But nothing hurt him more than his refusal to defend himself.

Bob Shrum, Kerry's top consultant, says his candidate wanted to push back against the Swiftboat attacks right away, but was talked out of it by aides who advised that he follow the polling, even if in retrospect "this was one of those classic instances where one should pay no attention to polling." Shrum says Kerry "ultimately did fight for himself," but lost because voters saw Bush as "their safe harbor after 9/11."

The one time I did see Kerry good and mad during the campaign was when he talked in an interview with me about what had happened to his friend and fellow Vietnam vet

Max Cleland, whose patriotism was questioned in ads during the '02 race he lost to Saxby Chambliss. "Did he need to leave all four limbs on the ground in Vietnam" to be considered a patriot?, Kerry roared, and made me think what a shame he couldn't talk about Max every day, if that's what it took to get him to show his passion, and to show himself.

(As it happens, some of Cleland's own former aides do not think that's why he lost his final campaign. "Max has himself convinced that the Republicans are to blame," says one of them, "but the bigger problem was that he didn't run as Max. He was told not to talk about veterans' issues because it didn't poll well, but that stripped away his uniqueness. He was paying these national consultants half a million dollars so he figured he'd better listen to them, and what they told him to do was what they told all their clients to do — run on health care. He'd been in the VA system his whole life! And they told him to run on education reform when he has no kids, and hadn't even been in a school in who knows how many years, and of course it didn't work.")

"The other rap" against Kerry, Shrum said, "was, 'He's stiff.' He's not, but he is a classic New Englander." And he badly hurt himself at a March 16 appearance at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, in response to a veteran's question about his vote against an \$87 billion supplemental appropriation for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He was hyper-aware that the man was asking the question that he'd answered hundreds of times before without any problem. But that time, as he tried to explain that he had voted for an earlier version of the bill — of course supporting the troops — before opposing final passage because the mission was so unclear, Kerry said, "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it." That's when the "flip-flopper" tag really took hold, and both the Bush campaign and reporters covering the race quoted that line often, "even though John is actually one of the most consistent politicians I ever met," says Shrum.

Kerry was also hurt in the race by not fighting back sooner and more energetically after a handful of Catholic bishops decided that the first election featuring a Catholic nominee since John F. Kennedy was the perfect time to declare that pro-choice politicians — like, oh, John Kerry, and also John Kerry — were not Catholics in good standing and should refrain from taking Communion.

American Catholics of all political stripes overwhelmingly opposed the idea that certain people should be turned away at the Communion rail, perhaps with the aid of the kind of handy list of bad check writers that convenience stores keep taped by the cash register. In fact, that sentiment was so strong that had Kerry actually been turned away, he might have won the Catholic vote. His only response, though, at the height of the “wafer wars,” was to mildly assert his right to his conscience. And when he finally did answer the bishops, “I love my church. I respect the bishops, but I respectfully disagree” in an October 25th appearance in Fort Lauderdale, even the Catholic News Service accorded it only four paragraphs.

After the campaign, Kerry told friends and staff that he thought the abortion issue had done him more damage than any other single thing, and he regretted not speaking out about his Catholic faith in a way he only did well after the election. During the campaign, I’d repeatedly been told by staff that that speech was coming, but it never did. Once, in an interview at his home in Georgetown, he started down that road — “At one point, I even thought about...” — becoming a priest, I think he was going to say, but stopped himself, and declined to finish the thought.

In September of 2006, he finally did go there, in a speech at Pepperdine University, where he said, “There will always be those bent on corrupting our political discourse, particularly where religion is involved. But I learned how important it is to make certain people have a deeper understanding of the values that shape me and the faith that sustains me. Despite this New Englander’s past reticence of talking publicly about my faith, I learned that if I didn’t fill in the picture myself, others would draw the caricature

for me. I will never let that happen again — and neither should you, because no matter your party, your ideology, or your faith, we are all doing a disservice when the debate is reduced to ugly and untrue caricatures.”

At Pepperdine, he spoke of everything from serving as an altar boy to his 12 years “in the wilderness” spiritually, after his return from Vietnam. He was pretty disillusioned in those days, he said. He went through a divorce, and questioned his whole direction. Then, he said, a reading from the Gospel of Mark helped him see the purpose of his work as a public servant. In that passage, the apostles James and John have asked Christ if they can sit at his right and left sides, so they can be seen as his top lieutenants. “James and John are trying to become the first political appointees in the New Testament — trying to get special favors for their proximity to power,” but Christ turns them down, and tells them that on the contrary, it’s the last who will be first in his kingdom. “Jesus responds with an essential lesson. He contrasts greatness in the Kingdom of God with Roman political power. While greatness in the Roman Empire is based on brute force — lording it over those less fortunate for the worst possible reason, simply because you can, greatness in the Kingdom of God is based on humble service, on being servant to all.”

Those lines in Mark had a profound impact on Kerry, he said: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Well, I consider public leadership to be a form of Christian service and an expression of my faith. I believe the most important teaching of the Gospels is that it is not enough just to say one believes in Jesus. Believing in Jesus requires action — it requires a bona fide effort, commitment to live in the example of Jesus, and nowhere in my judgment is the expectation of service more clearly stated than in Matthew 25:34,” a.k.a. the Beatitudes.

Among the questions all Christians must wrestle with, he said, is “How will we protect the weakest in our midst — innocent unborn children? How will our nation resist what Pope John Paul II calls a ‘culture of death’? How can we keep our nation from turning to

violence to solve some of its most difficult problems — abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies; the death penalty to combat crime; euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age, illness and disability; and war to address international disputes?” Then, he went on to detail at some length how we might actually reduce the number of abortions, through economic policies and federally funded child care.

Some swing-voting Catholics were so proud of having defeated Kerry, but if he’d given that dead-honest, unsweetened speech about faith, doubt and reconciliation two years earlier, the result might have been different.

“I was never opposed to doing it,” Shrum said of the long-promised, never delivered big-picture answer to the bishops,” and those things usually work out pretty well. But in an election that close, you just don’t know.”

The message that seemed to close the deal with Iowa voters — written on the signs the Kerry campaign had printed up before the Iowa Jefferson Jackson dinner — was that Kerry was “The Real Deal,” in other words, was the candidate most likely to be able to defeat Bush.

But that message was turned on its head during the general election, and in the end, the result that year was the same as in ’12, when a beleaguered but still believed incumbent was able to hold off a challenger whose core seemed all too malleable. Don’t “cut and run,” the Bush team said, but “stay the course” with a commander-in-chief who never “flip-flopped” — or seen another way, responded to new information. And weary as the public was with war, they knew Bush, and more voters felt that he could be trusted to correct his own mistakes than those that felt that he misled us into war.

Again, the race was so close that any number of factors could rightly be said to have made the difference, including the number of black voters in urban areas in Ohio who waited for hours in the rain to vote in polling places with too few machines. But polling in the week before Election Day showed that 14 percent of registered voters weren’t

happy with Bush and yet could not vote for Kerry. Fifty-six percent disapproved of Bush's handling of Iraq, and 55 percent disapproved of his handling of the economy, yet Bush consistently bested Kerry in polling that looked at whether he was "honest and truthful."

The last time Pew polled on honesty before the election, the gap was at its narrowest, with 40 percent of the registered voters polled saying they saw Bush that way, while 37 percent said the same of Kerry. And "among swing voters, in particular," a Pew report said, "the criticism that Kerry changes his mind too much is more damaging than the charges that he supports a return to big government or is 'too liberal for the country.'"

John McCain gets off the Straight Talk Express

With the global economy in freefall and the Republican brand in question, the '08 race was probably not winnable for John McCain. Yet when he got off the "Straight Talk Express," he gave up what voters and reporters liked best about him — the candor that had made him so irresistible as an insurgent during the primary season in 2000. Apparently, even he hated the result.

It was easier to let loose in 2000, of course, when he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. That openness was also tougher for McCain to keep up after he chose Sarah Palin as his running mate — a decision that his longtime aide Mark Salter says was not so much a gamble as it was "who's got an idea?"

One of the defining moments for Obama was in response to all the bad press about his longtime pastor, Jeremiah Wright, who'd said things like, "Not God bless America. God damn America!" from the pulpit — remarks the candidate claimed never to have heard in 20 years in Wright's pews.

First, Obama gave a bunch of TV interviews distancing himself from the preacher who'd called our country "the USA of KKK." But there was no real plan in place because the

campaign hadn't even known about the clips that were now running around the clock, and not just on Fox News. The candidate himself thought the obvious answer was to address the matter in a larger speech on race in America, but his aides didn't see that as so obvious. "This was a Grade-A shitstorm," David Plouffe wrote in his book about the campaign, *The Audacity to Win*. "If there had been thought bubbles above our heads they would have read 'We are screwed.'"

According to Plouffe, Obama made the case that "Wright will consume our campaign if I can't put it into broader context. This is a moment where conventional politics needs to take a backseat. I think I need to give a speech on race and how Wright fits into that. Whether people will accept it or not, I don't know. But I don't think we can move forward until I try." Eventually, his advisers agreed, despite the obvious risks. In other words, the Obama campaign made a different choice than the one the Kerry campaign made in response to the 'Grade-A shitstorm' of the Swiftboaters, and the result was that voters saw Obama at his finest, responding to a campaign crisis by speaking about an issue that animates him on the deepest level.

Though Obama is as much an introvert as Gore or Kerry, voters felt they knew what he cared about, and that mattered: "Obama's strong showing in the current poll reflects greater confidence in the Democratic candidate personally," a Pew study said in late October of 2008. Though only 53 percent of those registered voters polled saw Obama as well qualified to be president, compared to the 72 percent who said they saw McCain that way, they liked and trusted Obama more. And though Obama barely edged McCain as "honest," — 63 to 61, they overwhelmingly saw him as more inspiring, 71 to 37, and more "down to earth," 71 to 54.

Both McCain and Obama's fellow Democrat Hillary Clinton ran on their experience, which hurt them in a change election. Though both belatedly tried to make the case that he or she, and not Obama, was the true change agent — that McCain was "the original maverick" and that Clinton would have been quite a departure, too, as the first woman

president. It didn't work. Hillary didn't present herself as the first serious female contender, or talk about what it would mean to women if she won, until it was too late and the primary was already out of reach. That's because, as one of her top aides says, she was uncomfortable running so overtly as a woman, "so she never gave the speech on women that Obama gave on race. We talked about it the whole time and she kept saying she was going to, but she never did."

"Oddly enough, a lot of people from the women's groups didn't want her to" either, and "didn't want to make it an issue. We could have been more explicit." Later in the campaign, she did refer to the cracks in the glass ceiling.

McCain, meanwhile, was not having fun on the trail, and missed the days when he spent full-time kibitzing with the press. But those days were impossible to replicate, Salter says: "In 2000, if he misspoke, they'd say, 'He transposed Shiite and Sunni,' because they knew he knew the difference. But eight years later, Twitter and embeds with flip-cams had made that impossible" early on. "The last person to be convinced, and who got pretty petulant about it was McCain, at one point declaring, 'See that tree? I'm going to walk over to that god damn tree and have an avail right now.' We were sorry to see it go, but every day he was open, the result was that all the focus was on the funniest quote of the day, and they couldn't hear what he said on Iraq."

Obama, meanwhile, never even considered granting that kind of easy access, and though the reporters who covered him were less enamored than advertised, he didn't need us as much as McCain did, who rightly used to refer to the boys and girls on the bus as his base.

Mitt Romney on *Candid Camera*

NPR's autopsy of Mitt Romney's campaign in 2012 summed it up this way: "One big challenge Romney faced: Americans want to like their president. Almost everyone who

knows Romney personally does like him. But that likable guy was hard to find on the campaign trail.”

Throughout the campaign, the crucial question he left unanswered was, “Who are you, really?” Everyone knew this was a problem for him, and knew, too, that he had a story to tell, but wouldn’t. One indisputably authentic part of his life revolved around his experience as a lifelong member of the Church of Latter Day Saints — his time getting doors slammed in his face as a missionary in France, and for years, serving his fellow Mormons as a lay bishop, being there for them when they were sick, or down or, as we finally heard at the Republican National Convention, dying at age 14.

Yet voters heard remarkably little about any of this, perhaps out of concern that some evangelicals, who do see Mormonism as a cult, would reject him if he made too much of his faith. That wasn’t a frivolous concern, but it was a risk worth taking because his religion was such a central part of his life that its absence left too much of the canvas bare. “I never understood it,” said his fellow Republican Karen Hughes, especially since one of the first rules of political messaging is that you have to define yourself before your opponent can.

After he lost, Ann Romney said it was because voters never got to know “the real Mitt.” She blamed the media, but the real culprit was her husband, who gave reporters — and their viewers and readers — so little to work with. The way he ran his campaign, and in important ways failed to show up for it, gave voters too little to hold onto. With changing demographics, a team that lagged in both data and digital, a primary season that dragged on and on and the infamous “47 percent” video, Romney might well have lost anyway. Yet the failure to appear as himself in the role of nominee hurt him, too.

The video was so devastating at least in part because it filled in the blanks, and left the public thinking, “Oh, so *this* is the real Romney.” It was captured off-the-record at a Florida fundraiser. In the video, Romney said that 47 percent of voters would chose

Obama “no matter what” because those are Americans “who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That that’s an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what. ... These are people who pay no income tax. My job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.”

That might or might not have been the “real” Romney, as he was really only telling his donors what he thought they wanted to hear — and said as much later, insisting that he does not see nearly half of all Americans as takers, or anything of the sort. Some will argue that the phony “Etch-a-Sketch” candidate, ever ready to be whatever we want him to be, *is* the one true Romney, but that’s no more true than it was when Al Gore was accused of the same thing in 2000.

But even now, Romney adviser Stuart Stevens strongly disagrees with the idea that the campaign should have gotten the candidate’s friends who gave powerful testimonials at the convention in Tampa out earlier and more often: “How would you have presented those people? Would you put them in ads? Have them come to rallies? You don’t have a communications mechanism that affords that opportunity.”

The one Super-PAC commercial in which a former business partner talked about how Romney dropped everything to help him find his missing daughter never moved the needle in either ‘08 or ‘12, Stevens says. “It’s a moving story, but it’s not a reason to vote for him.”

McCain’s former aide Salter just as strongly disagrees: “I didn’t like him very much because he attacked us on immigration,” yet “those stories changed my impression of the guy. It’s a credit to Romney that he didn’t want to exploit it, but I don’t know why you can’t cut an ad.” Instead, they let Obama “freeze him in cement as a plutocrat” by

focusing on his time at Bain Capital — an attack that Romney’s people not only had known was coming, but had already dealt with during his ‘08 run.

At the end of the primary season, Stevens says, polling and focus groups overwhelmingly said what voters needed to hear from Romney was not biographical information but how he planned to create jobs. “They said, ‘Until I have confidence that he has plans to fix the problems, he could be the nicest guy in the world and I don’t care.’ We were kind of surprised.”

Had he not answered those questions, Stevens said, “he would’ve rolled into the convention” amid complaints that “all he talks about is that he’s nice to people; a lot of people are nice.”

Shouldn’t they have done more to define him, though? “It would have been nice to do more, period. Yes.” But the Romney campaign was badly outspent on ads. And was his character or personal story some kind of threshold question for voters? No, his advisers decided.

He did talk about his faith some, Stevens says, raising it for instance in the primary debate in which he answered a question about his consistency by saying he had only one faith and one marriage. “But he wasn’t going to run on that.”

His campaign sees Romney as the victim of a hostile, politically biased press corps that never asked any hard questions of Obama. To the extent that’s true, it’s because the president wasn’t accessible, and neither was Romney. “We know less about Barack Obama than any other president” in American history, Stevens claims, “and he’s the bio candidate?”

Reporters, he feels, let Obama sell “himself as an archetype — he’s going to bend history’s rainbow.” But when it came to the Republican in the race, they obsessed about such minor matters as Seamus the dog and Ann Romney’s horse. Not incidentally, how

he treated his dog and the kind of fancy horse his wife rode, even if it was as therapy for her MS, became seen as clues about his character, as was his plan, while so many Americans were still without a job and struggling, to install a car elevator in his beach home in Southern California.

A frustration with the *New York Times* that seemed to both color and typify the Romney campaign's relationship with the press was an op-ed the candidate had written, originally titled, "A way forward for the auto industry." But it ran under the headline, "Let Detroit go bankrupt" — and was widely quoted in a way that made it appear as if those had been Romney's words.

The Romney campaign didn't grant more access because the access they did give was all "gotcha" and no substance, Stevens said: "It's like the guy who says 'I want to come over to talk about our relationship.' No, he just wants to have sex."

After his years in the White House, voters felt they already knew Obama well, and much of the personal criticism didn't stick. The public did not feel that same way about Romney, however, and in a post-election piece, Pew's Andrew Kohut wrote that "Mr. Romney's personal image took a hard hit during the primary campaign and remained weak on election day. Just 47% of exit-poll respondents viewed him favorably, compared with 53% for Mr. Obama. Throughout the campaign, Mr. Romney's favorable ratings were among the lowest recorded for a presidential candidate in the modern era. A persistent problem was doubt about his empathy with the average voter. By 53% to 43%, exit-poll respondents said that Mr. Obama was more in touch than Mr. Romney with people like themselves."

In the last week of the race, Pew polling found Obama continued to lead his rival on personal characteristics, and was seen as the candidate with more moderate positions on issues and as more willing to work with members of the other party. He also held wide advantages on empathy and consistency, leading Romney by about two-to-one (59% to

31%) as the candidate who connects well with ordinary Americans, and by 51% to 36% as the candidate who takes consistent positions on issues.

More than six in 10 said they saw Romney as “promising more than he can deliver” while 53% agreed with the statement that “it’s hard to know what Romney really stands for.”

In a shaky economy, Obama was certainly beatable, but in the end, polling showed that voters liked and trusted him even more than they liked his positions or trusted that his policy prescriptions were working.

Romney, whose policy scored on the high end of the phony index, under-performed in a campaign in which his worst mistakes, like his refusal to release more of his tax returns, invariably played into the narrative that he was hiding something — offshore, unavailable to the public at large. And the 47 percent video taken at the Florida fundraiser reinforced the impression that Mitt Romney was very different when he thought the cameras were turned off.

C-SPAN’s “Road to the White House” coverage for the 2016 cycle began recently, and the potential candidates for that next race include some obvious high scorers on the authenticity index: Chris Christie, for instance, and both Joe Biden and Andrew Cuomo. Though Hillary Clinton has not always been seen that way in the past, some Democrats feel that was *the* lesson of ‘08 for her — that her cautious early campaign lost her the race, and that in the back half of the primary, when the nomination was already out of reach, she “ran the table when she finally ran as a woman,” said someone who used to work for the Clintons. When she, in other words, finally ran as herself.

To return to the “Moneyball” analogy, baseball team owners have used technology to beat the competition by finding undervalued qualities in players they could recruit on the cheap. But at this point, authenticity is so undervalued that campaigns could get an

edge on the competition just by remembering how deeply and predictably the public craves it.