Campaign Reform and the Failure of Leadership

Transcript of plenary session held in Philadelphia on June 11, 1997

PAUL TAYLOR

Journalist and creator of Campaign Reform Organization "Free Time for Straight Talk"

MICHAEL SCHUDSON: Thanks, Judith. As the person asked to chair the working group on leadership, I think this is my first test of leadership. Would I be brave enough to introduce the person who spent most of his working life in the media? In this case, I'm—I am brave enough, and anyway, Paul Taylor's a former journalist. Paul Taylor first came to widespread public notice during last year's campaign, when he left his position as an editor and reporter at The Washington Post to found the political reform coalition Free TV for Straight Talk. Mr. Taylor's efforts have been a major contributor to the current debates over campaign and campaign finance reform. Hoping to refocus campaigns on substantive issues and de-emphasize negative advertising by giving free television time to candidates, Mr. Taylor has challenged leaders both in politics and in the media to begin rethinking their assumptions.

A journalist with 25 years experience, Mr. Taylor spent 14 years at The Washington Post covering national politics and social issues. I should

probably add that now that adultery is a leading item in the news day today, I should introduce Paul as the man who put adultery on the political map. He asked the famous question of Gary Hart, `Have you ever committed adultery?' And actually, he recounts this and the thinking that went into it wonderfully in his book, "See How They Run."

In the early '90s, he served for three years as The Post's bureau chief in South Africa. He's the author of two books, in fact, on presidential campaigns and political journalism. A graduate of Yale, he's lectured at Princeton, been a visiting professor at Princeton, lectured [at] many other universities. So he comes to us wearing several hats that are relevant to the topic of leadership: as a close observer of our political leaders, as a leader in journalism and now in the third sector, I guess we call it, the leader of a significant reform effort, Paul Taylor.

PAUL TAYLOR: Thank you very much, Michael. Kevin Phillips this morning reminded us of how much, in 1997, the popular culture is infatuated with markets and the economy, and so I'd like to use a market metaphor to ask you to think about politics and, by extension, political leadership as an industry in decline, which, it seems to me, it clearly is these days. Two numbers encapsulate that decline. If we go back to 1960, a very important political presidential election, probably for many of us in this room, kind of a touchstone political event, $175 million was spent in the 1960 political campaigns—all politics, all levels—$175 million; 36 years later, $4 billion. If you work it out, that comes to an increase in the cost of politics and the expense of politics of about four or five times the rate of inflation over those 36 years. The cost is going up; turnout has gone straight down. Turnout was 63 percent in 1960; it's just under 49 percent in the last campaign. Never, in 220 years of American history, has there been as deep or has sustained a drop in the most basic form of civic participation, voting.

So I think if you think about the enterprise of politics, you can conclude that if this were a business, it would be out of business. It's investing more, it's spending more, it's advertising more and it's losing customers. And my notion is that there is something in the way we have organized the

conversation—get to that a little bit later—that forces the various actors in this enterprise, in fact, to repel their own customers.

But there are other explanations for that as well, and I'd like to start by doing something that I don't think we've had a lot of today, and I feel it and I suspect some people in this room feel it. One of the reasons that politics has become so marginalized in people's lives is, let us acknowledge, there is a lot of good news out there. A lot of good things are happening in America in 1997. I think of that Carly Simon song—I think it's Carly Simon—"These Are the Good Old Days." I mean, every graph that we use to measure our socioeconomic status, whether it's unemployment, whether it's crime rate—everybody knows them—all the ones you want to go north are going north and all the ones you want to go south are going south, and week after week, we read explanations by a rather puzzled media, which is much more comfortable describing how terrible things are, quoting economists saying, `We can't believe it. The business cycle has been repealed.' There is a lot of skepticism, perhaps deserved. I'm not making the argument that this is going to last forever, but it's here, and I think that the important—the point I want to make is I think it has moved into the perception of the average American.

One of the things I did for 25 years as a political reporter under the tutelage of David Broder, sort of the dean of political reporting, is, every campaign, go out, knock on doors, talk to people in Middle America; sit in their living rooms, ask them what's on their mind. And I was struck very much in the '80s in Ronald Reagan's '80s of how much the notion of declinism, which was popularized in academia by people like Paul Kennedy and other economics how much the notion that we were over the hill, on the downside of the mountain, was out there in Middle America and how much it ate—ate at people. And the people used different ways of describing it, whether it was the budget deficit, which they saw ballooning every year. This was a government. We couldn't even keep our own House in order. We're mortgaging our children's futures. I mean, this idea of America as exceptional, America as number one, America as the big dog is enormously important to people, and I think that in the '80s, people lost that.

Clearly, I think, in the '90s, it is back. If any of you read the Sunday New York Times magazine section this past week, it was about how the idea of the popular culture of America is now coarsing through the entire world. People are taking notice. And I think people are taking notice in this country as well. So it seems to me that we are in a season again, I don't claim it's going to last forever where economics and culture is trumpeting politics and people have the freedom to care less about politics. To add the obvious points: The Cold War is over; there's no `Hot War' going on; we're not sending our young men and women off to do battle. The only battle we're doing in the military these days is over gender issues, which just lowers the stakes.

So in other words, there's good news out there. But, of course, there's also bad news. And the whole premise of this commission and other commissions is that at a time when there's this much good news, why is it that confidence in basic institutions is so low? And you all know the measures. In 1960, if you asked the public a question, `Do you trust your government to do what's right most of the time?' about three-quarters would say yes. In 1997, despite all the good news, about one-quarter of Americans will say yes. We know the statistics from young people Alexander Astin does these surveys of entering freshmen every year, and there's good news on that front in terms of people who believe in social engagement and justice, that it seems the generation that's going to college now is more interested in the helping professions, more interested in teaching, more interested in volunteerism. But, boy, politics—you know, it's down there at 10 percent, 12 percent, you know, 13 percent. It just hasn't touched with them.

Or another indicator, which I found the most fascinating one last year during the presidential election was a question having to do with political character in leadership, where pollsters would ask some variant of this sequence of questions, `Do you think Bill Clinton is trustworthy?' Sixty percent of the American public, `No. No.' `Do you think Bill Clinton is trustworthy enough to be president?' Sixty percent of the American public, `Yeah. Mm-hmm. That's fine.' So we have lowered the bar on a lot of these things. At one level, you can perhaps say it's sort of a reasonable, rational adjustment to the world

that a very savvy public sees. But it does raise this question: If things are so good, why is trust so low?

And let me advance three or four—just a quick tour of the landscape—some of the explanations that have been offered; some of them, I think, that would be endorsed by people in this room. And let's start with people in my old craft, the piranha press that we are here to deliver only the bad news, that we are smug, we're contemptuous of authority, we look for the base and the low motives all the time. We pick up on—on a view of public life that I think, quite frankly, Kevin Phillips encapsulated all too well when he talked about Sacramento and, by extension, Washington as a place where all they do there is move the money around and then they look for public policy justifications for it.

I find that a very troubling attitude towards public life, but I think it is perhaps an accurate description of what you get, particularly from the elite press. That's frankly, one of the reasons why it gotten more and more difficult for me to stay in my old craft—because the public face of the press goes on television where you want to become a pundit. You go on the Sunday talk shows. And that's the way you want to hold a conversation on those talk shows, is sort of above the fray with a smirk and a sneer, encouraging everybody to sort of look down on the whole enterprise.

As the writer James Woolcott described the tone of it—forget the substance—the tone of it—and I think the tone does become very important in these things—they sit around with sort of the casual disdain of country club members discussing the local pro and kind of they're disappointed in him. I think that is a part of what ails us. I don't think it's the biggest part or, by any means, the only part.

I think another thing is simply, very quickly, the nature of modern communication—its intrusiveness, its intimacy. Let's go back to 1960. It seems like a generation or, several generations ago. You know, political scientists, in the early days of television, used to worry about how it would give us imperial presidencies. It would become an electronic throne, and the president, as opposed to, let us say, Congress or the courts, where you have

many voices—a single voice could command this enormously powerful medium and would build these we would sort of tip the balance in our system. And, indeed, Eisenhower and the tranquil times of the '50s, with his smile, and then Kennedy with his incredibly glamorous family and persona, which he invited the country into his White House and he sort of came into our dens and we were infatuated by it and compelled by it—and that was sort of the early years of our relationship and the political system's relationship with television.

Well, you get into a very slippery slope when allow that medium to create that kind of intimate relationship between leader and follower. We know 36 years later where that takes us, and it takes us to curiosities developing. Well, who are they really? I mean, they understand—Jack Kennedy understood, certainly, how much that could do for him politically, to show off who he is and to use his life as a metaphor for his policies because it's a very compelling way to tell a story. Inevitably, people will become curious, and inevitably, people will discover everybody has warts. And it is that discovery I think the last 50 years, it seems like television has been with us forever. In fact, it's a rather young experiment in humankind, and it allows the masses to know how the sausage is made, both about government and politics and about the clay feet of their leaders. And I think we're still working that through. I think that as a culture, as an anthropological phenomenon, we are still trying to work through having this terrible knowledge and getting beyond it.

But this looking for sort of the worst—you know, going from the heroic to the antiheroic, which we've seen over the last generation or two, it's not just the press and it's not just the nature of the technology that does that. What happens is, then, the political class themselves understand that that is the way to get ahead, so they are suddenly, then, incentivised to get themselves elected by chopping the other guy off at the knees. And that's part of the reason—you know, I mean, ask yourself, if you're a candidate for public office and going back to some of the things that Chris Edley was saying in the last session—you want to present your 10-point plan on affirmative action, you want to go spend the hard money that you spent lots of time raising to go put it out there to what you know is a public whose first inclination is to believe

absolutely the worst about you and a press that is likely to compress it and, you know, simplify it in ways that you didn't mean. It doesn't make sense. It's not the most efficient use of your resources.

Therefore, what you do is you spend your hard-earned dollars letting the public know how terrible the other guy is. Can we roll a tape?

This is on my mind. There was a political commercial that ran just this last weekend in the Washington, DC, area. This is a campaign for Attorney General of Virginia. The vote was yesterday. I'll tell you after we see it how it came out. The fellow who's depicted on this...

(A video excerpt of a political advertisement was played, which is described below by Paul Taylor.)

You know, it's hard to know who the consuming public, is supposed to be more repulsed by, the candidate we just saw in that ad or the candidate who decided this is the way to run for Attorney General, to show his opponent in, obviously, a drunken state asking a former client to take her clothes off. Some of you may recognize who Gil Davis is, and the reason that this was deemed, you know, part of the discourse—Gil Davis is one of Paula Jones' two lawyers. You know, Gil Davis and so he's been very much in the news lately. And it was perceived by, obviously, the guy who ran this ad that he was going to win the race because he had gotten so much publicity around the Paula Jones suit, he was the front-runner. This is a Republican primary that was held yesterday. So this was the attack ad. I guess the good news is that the guy—that Davis did not win this race; neither did the guy who ran this commercial. They finished three and four. The bad news is that the turnout was 5 percent.

Now—and it seems to me that this, [is] as good as anything, encapsulates this kind of tragedy of the commons that we experience when campaigns roll around. The calculation of the tactics turned out to be wrong in the case of the guy who ran this ad, but oftentimes, it turns out to be right.

And in the narrower sense, in a tragedy of the commons, each individual actor believes that he has to behave in a way whether it's a fishing

community and they each feel they have to overfish the waters because if they don't, someone else is going to. And you can't ask them not to behave that way. That's what their political culture, that's what their incentives and penalties tell them to do.

The trouble is from the point of view of the voter. What is the voter to do? The voter has no way out. I think the voter sees this kind of discourse in campaign after campaign, and you get sort of angry and disgusted by it, but what can you do? There's a phrase from the writer Todd Gitlin. `They are forced to become cognoscente of their own bamboozlement.' They know this. I mean, they know that, you know, this is not the whole of Gil Davis; this is Gil Davis in his worst moment, and all of us have worst moments and we just pray to God that they're not going to be on television.

So the voter understands that the manipulation is going on, gets very disgusted by it and behaves in what strikes me as a fairly rational way. The voter retreats. The voter says, `I'm out of here. What's the point if this is what I get?' Now the trouble is that the tactical calculation is exactly to have that happen.

You know, political communication is very different from, let us say, product advertising. If you have Coke and Pepsi, they can go at each other every now and then. They can't afford to say too many nasty things about each other because sooner or later, people will stop drinking colas, and that's bad for everybody. It doesn't work that way in the political campaign where, particularly in a cynical era where you know that people's instincts are to believe the worst, you don't want to go out there and persuade people to vote for you. It doesn't make sense. You want to persuade people who might have been inclined to vote for your opponent not to vote at all. So political discourse becomes a battle of attrition.

So the lines I talked about earlier, where we're spending man, you know, much more and the turnout is going down is not an accident. This is exactly the way the system has evolved itself. Now some of the political consultants will acknowledge that. It's a tough problem. I mean, it's the classic vicious cycle, and it makes governance and leadership more difficult.

One of the problems with Washington is that it's full of people who got there by winning campaigns like this. They know how they got there. Another problem is that they were elected by an electorate that has been misshapen by this kind of discourse. The people who are first to drop out, walk away from it all, are the 50 percent, 60 percent of the people who occupy what Colin Powell calls the sensible center. They're not particularly ideological; they're not particularly partisan; they don't pay that much attention. And, you know, if they say that this is only about, you know, `You're bad. You're worse. So's your old lady,' `Good-bye. I'm out of here.' Now there may be smaller groups of people on the polls who are partisan, who are ideological and who may get charged up. `They can't say this about my guy.'

So we have a political system that tends to give more empowerment and more voice to the people at the polls, and we have wound up with a Congress which is somewhat misshapen, a little bit out of sync with the political centerism of the country. There's more partisanship in Congress—people who do analyses of these things—than there has been anytime in 40, 50, 60 years in terms of the partisan vote count. You have Republicans who are, by and large, more conservative than the country as a whole and Democrats who are, by and large, more Democratic. There's also an effect that comes from gerrymandering that produces that as well.

That has led, in recent years, to what was described a year or two ago as, when we had very contentious times between Clinton and the Congress in the first term, that has led to these train wrecks and the government not working, shutdowns and stuff, which has only re-enforced and ratified the cynicism that a lot of people have.

More recently, what's happened in the current cycle—and it's kind of interesting—is that the politicians, both Clinton and the Gingrich Republicans, have been chastened by their overreaching—Clinton by his health-care initiative in the first few years; Gingrich with various parts of the Contract With America—and they have both decided, in response to these dynamics, to cool it, to get small, to, as a matter of fact, miniaturize the stakes

as best they can, because their current calculation—and these things sort of go on that is, we're better off that way.

So we now have this rather quiet budget agreement that we've been reading about over the last few months—that really doesn't take on some of the very large issues that are going to be confronting the country but does, in its own way, represent a kind of—of small form of leadership. And the public isn't particularly interested in it. Most of the public isn't paying attention to it. The people who are paying attention —the pundits on one side or the other or the activists—are all terribly disappointed by it because they think their guys who they sent to Washington to pursue an ideological agenda have now sold out.

Part of the problem here, you know, in this very unhappy, vicious cycle has to do with a dual set of expectations that the public has. On one level the public is very pragmatic, wants government to work, wants it to hew towards the center, but they also want to get passionate about a set of ideas and a set of people.

I think that leaves us in this state where I think we're stuck with sort of getting small and staying small for a while until something comes along, whether it's the end of the boom or whether it's a new enemy or something that'll sort of shake us out of this lethargy. I'm one who believes that for a long time that the challenge of sort of the generational deficit, the baby boomers' retirement is really—is or ought to be on the nation's agenda and this is a sort of a challenge that would call for big leadership. It's hard to imagine exactly how we're going to get from here to there, although I'm not completely pessimistic about that. I think the good news on an issue like that is it is such an evident issue to the whole country, it affects all of us so closely that sooner or later, when the moment comes, I think the politicians will step up to it.

Let me talk as a case study, however, for another issue. It's more of a process issue, and it's the issue of campaign finance and why that is proving so difficult for this particular political structure to address. You know, ever since the mid-'70s, which is the last time we had a sort of a big scandal and then a set of laws which were never really implemented the way that the writers of

the laws had hoped, in part because of some Supreme Court decisions, there has been a campaign finance reform movement in Congress, literally for 20 years now. And it never goes anywhere and it's been an article of faith of the reform community that all we need is a scandal. `We're just one scandal away from finally getting something serious happening.'

Well, 1996 was a campaign again, in the get-small tradition, what was '96 about? Can anybody remember? I mean, it's easy to caricature it. I mean, Bill Clinton, with Dick Morris whispering in his ear, made it a campaign about cell phones for neighborhood groups and school uniforms and anti-teen smoking. I mean, if he was running for president of the PTA, you know, he sounded right. He miniaturized the politics. It served him well. He felt the need to go out and raise a tremendous amount of money to put this message on the air. He had been frightened and chastened by the results of '94. But it's not a campaign that has set himself up to project any particular agenda in the second term, so we're somewhat shapeless, and it is a campaign that has then produced scandals which tend, again, to ratify the cynicism.

We're now six months into the second Clinton term and the 105th Congress, and there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of sense that this Congress is ready to take on campaign finance reform. A couple of reasons: one is an aphorism from medicine—disease protects itself. Despite the open sore that our campaign finance system is and is evident to all Americans, the members of Congress also tend to see it as having one overriding virtue, which is it elected them and it got them there. And they have in the end, what we're dealing with is not a Democratic or Republican resistance to campaign finance reform; we're dealing with a resistance of the incumbent party. And there are 435 members of that group in Congress and 100 members of that group in the Senate.

A second problem is that the public is of several minds on campaign finance reform. It wants to restrict the flow of money into the political system. It does not particularly want to restrict the ability of candidates to deliver a message. It hates the way these messages come out, but it is very, very sensitive on free speech issues. The Buckley vs. Valeo decision tried to sort of split the

difference there. It's much criticized. It's an imperfect vehicle, but it does recognize that there is a classic competition of values here on campaign finance, and it's very difficult to square.

Another problem—and this is a problem endemic to political systems. I think we see it particularly now that the reward structures for members of a legislature for political leaders are to take a position rather than to produce a result. That's not true in all instances, and when we deal with sort of classic pork barrel stuff—bringing home the bacon to your constituents—you do need to produce a result. But by and large, the message to you is, `If I just take a position on something, then I'm protected. The 30-second ad won't hurt me that much.' And we see some of that.

Finally, and in defense of Congress, it is very difficult to know what to do with campaign finance reform. There is the problem if you deal with members of the House and the Senate, that one size doesn't fit all. You have 435 different districts. You have rural and you have urban. You have non-competitive races and competitive races. You have all sorts of differences, and you also have a change in the way politics has been happening in the last couple of cycles, which has sort of defeated and undermined the leading paradigm for reform. For the last 20 years, the leading approach to reform is, `Let's try to limit how much money candidates can spend,' and as the courts says, you cannot do that constitutionally; you have to have a voluntary system of limiting it. So let's bring some inducements—free air time, franking privileges, other things that will make the candidates willing to limit what they spend.

The problem with that approach is that increasingly—we saw it a lot in this last cycle that there's more and more political money being spent and political communication being done by people who are not the candidates themselves. These are the so-called issue advocacy groups, these independent expenditure groups. The money no longer goes through the coffers of the candidates. The AFL-CIO decides to be a big player or the Christian Coalition decides to be a big player or the National Federation of the Independent Businesses. And it seems to me the message out of the scandal stories of this past year was, `Who

the hell wants to give any money to a candidate? All you're going to invite is a subpoena.' So the technology of campaigns has become sufficiently sophisticated that we'll just do it ourselves. We'll find some fly under the radar screen—Citizens for a Better Pennsylvania—and we'll come in and we'll run a bunch of ads against Tom Ridge when he runs for re-election for governor next year.

Now it's hard enough to restrict candidate speech or to restrict candidate spending. It's almost impossible, under our system, to restrict the speech of some of these outside groups. So the danger is that if you go for a scheme that limits the amount of money candidates can spend, you will simply drive that money to these outside groups, where the communication can be often more pernicious and less accountable and you're not accomplishing that much.

Having said that it's very difficult to get a big solution, I believe in sort of keeping with the sort of get-small message that the politicians have picked up on themselves, that small solutions are possible; incomplete solutions are worth pursuing. And that takes me to the idea of free air time as a way both to help out with campaign finance, but I think as a way to provide a platform for better discourse. And the notion here is, on a campaign finance fix—I won't go into all the details, but one thing you can do with a campaign finance fix is to eliminate so-called soft money. For those of you who followed it closely, these are these big checks—the $50,000, $100,000, $250,000 checks that are not subject to the limitations that currently exist in the law. They started out as a loophole in the late '70s. They are now the loophole that swallowed the law. Most—70 percent, 80 percent, 90 percent, I think, of the, quote, "scandal" stories you've been reading about for the last six or eight months are soft-money contributions.

And the Supreme Court in Buckley vs. Valeo said, `Well, you cannot restrict spending because'—in the Supreme Court's view, that restricts speech. You can restrict large contributions, especially contributions that raise the specter or the odor of corruption. Soft money, it seems to me, falls into that category. We have found that soft money and these big checks are beyond the public's choke point. So it seems to me there's a very, very persuasive public policy

argument for starting with reform that says, 'Let's take soft money out of the system.' I don't think there's any constitutional impediment there.

Having taken soft money out of the system, which accounted for about $250 million in this last cycle, it seems to me you don't want to remove the ability of candidates and parties to communicate, especially when you have these outside groups hovering at the edges. Now communication from these outside groups is fine. It seems to me it helps make the political system robust. You want to hear from a lot of different groups. But there is a difference. Only the candidates stand for election on Election Day, and it seems to me you do want to structure a campaign season where the candidates are advantaged. So you certainly don't want to disadvantage them. So if you take soft money away from the candidates and parties, it seems to me you want to provide some resource that make sure that they will be able to communicate, and that's where free air time comes in.

All the polls tell us the public will not quite swallow public financing, which, in a perfect world, is the best solution. The politicians won't do it because the public tells them you know, that's sort of welfare for politicians and why should we pay our good tax dollar to support the system that we can't stand? But free air time is in a different category. You don't have to reach in to the pockets of the average, everyday citizen to get free air time. Free air time—what you're trying to do is extract a resource that already exists in the public domain. It is the public's airways, after all. They are leased to commercial broadcasters free of charge in return for a commitment, or a compact, from the broadcasters that they serve the public interests, convenience and necessity. This is an enormously valuable piece of public real estate. And the broadcasters have been using it and enriching themselves for 60-some years now. We are the only country in the world where, during election times, we force our candidates to go racing around the country to raise big sums of money to put them in the pockets of broadcasters in order that they get their message out.

Virtually every other country reserves some free air time for parties and candidates in election season. It seems like a no-brainer to me, but one of the

reasons it's tough to make it happen is that the broadcast industry are really, in some ways, the Rockefellers and Carnegies and Mellons of this late century. I mean, the Big Three—or, what used to be the Big Three—are owned by GE, by Westinghouse, by Disney. These are these enormous conglomerates. They're able to throw a lot of money at the political system in order to make sure that the political system doesn't impose on them this requirement. And I think perhaps as important or I think ultimately much more important, they are the ticket onto the 6:00 news for a member of Congress, and that's a very big deal, because members of Congress are forced to be cautious, to be careful, to be risk-averse. And they're desperate to get their message out, and they don't want to offend, I think, the station manager back home.

So what seems to me to be a kind of an obvious solution here: Let's get soft money out. That's the biggest corrupting influence—not the only one, but it's doable constitutionally. Let's replace it with free air time. And then I would add and bringing it closer to the subject of this convocation and bringing myself closer to a conclusion, if you give the time for free, it seems to me, you are in a position to try to change the discourse a little bit. And my proposal has been—and it's been proposed by many people before me—let's try to ask the candidates for more accountability with this time.

What I did last year on a voluntary basis was go around to the networks and say, `Why don't you give a minute a night for the last three or four weeks of the campaign to Dole and to Clinton? Let them rotate night after night. Road block it so every night, at 7:59, for a minute or two'—and I started out with three minutes—`you know— we'll see Clinton tonight. He can talk about whatever he wants, but it's just him. And tomorrow night, Dole. And we'll go back and forth.' And all the big networks run it, and you hope that you create a kind of running debate. And you want to park it right in the middle of prime time, where you get the big audience, because some of the difficulties with proposals to encourage better discourse, including the notion of putting it on the Web and having the exposition about the affirmative action program is that's all well and good. A lot of that already happens. But it tends to wind up in a kind of civic ghetto. It tends to wind up on PBS or in The

New York Times' op-ed page. And those people who will consume that stuff are already pretty well served by our current system of information.

Where the real breakdown occurs is with Joe Six Pack, who's actually pretty savvy and who really does care about his country and would like to be engaged, but now our system, every time an election rolls around, puts its worst foot forward to Joe Six Pack, and the message to Joe is, `Joe, this isn't about your life. This isn't about getting your kids into college or having enough money for them. This is about our silly little games.' And Joe knows what to do with that. So let's try to—you know, to move into this tragedy of commons, change the rules a little bit in a way to try to encourage a better discourse.

There are two people who thought this was a terrible idea. The networks themselves just thought it was horrible. I was able to recruit Walter Cronkite to the cause, and with Walter Cronkite, we got a very sort of handsome collection of muckety-mucks. And, in effect, this was a public persuasion campaign, wagging our fingers at the networks. `Do the right thing. It's good for America. Come on. How much can a couple of minutes cost you?'

I worked my way through a lot of the corporate offices and tended to get to see sort of the vice president in charge of saying no. And to put yourselves in their shoes, as I did, many of them were about my age, so they're in their mid- to late 40s and they've been with ABC or NBC or CBS all—all their lives and they—and they worked their way up. Well, what's happened to ABC and CBS and NBC during their 25 years of loyal service? The three of them, 25 years ago, together used to have 90 percent of the audience every prime-time night, and now they're down. They're lucky to have 50 percent.

So they've seen their line go down. And this has created a kind of risk-averse, `Oh, my God,' you know, enormously competitive situation. And now along comes some save-the-world guy who says, `I have just the solution to make America work better. Just give me a minute of your time.' And, you know, what they all said to me earnestly was, `It's- not the minute,' and it really isn't the minute. You know, they can find the minute anytime. It's the clicker. They are petrified that if America is planning to tune in to "Seinfeld" or

"Roseanne" and, instead, sees Dole or Clinton, America will hit that clicker so fast and then they won't come back for the rest of the night. And they spent all of their money and zillions of dollars making sure that the 8:30 audience stays for the 9:00 show, and now what we're going to introduce—this little modest amount of better discourse in the heart of that world? Huh-uh. Don't want to play.

In fact, I visited with Tom Brokaw because—although, mostly, I was going for the corporate guys, I know some of the folks in the journalistic community in television, and I met Brokaw over the years. And I wanted to let him know what I was doing. And this was in about February of '96. The Republican primaries were under way. This happened to be a Wednesday afternoon. And the night before—it was a Tuesday night—one of the Republican primaries was on. And the way the NBC News had wanted to cover these Republican primaries was to do a little 90-second spot break into "Dateline." "Dateline" is a newsmagazine show that runs, I think, three or four nights a week now on NBC. And they wanted to break into "Dateline" so they could be the first to report, Bob Dole won the South Carolina primary, you know, today with 64 percent of the vote. And they do the usual stand-up blah-de-blah.

So Brokaw's describing this to me and he said, `Paul, listen to understand our world. We don't get Nielsen reports by the hour and we don't get Nielsen reports by the half-hour. We get Nielsen reports by the minute. And it's now 2:00 on a Wednesday afternoon and, at some point within the next few hours, the Nielsen report is going to come across my desk of what happened to the "Dateline" audience when, instead of doing a show about your health or one soft feature or another or a catch a thief feature or something else, we broke in for 90 seconds of hard political news, and I don't have to wait to see it. I know exactly what happened to the audience. You know, it goes like this. So this is the world that we have to worry about, and this is, in effect, what we're up against.'

The other group that doesn't want to let this happen are the political campaign consultants. They want to be able to tell their story their way. They are hired to help people win elections. They are hired to produce stuff like

this, although sometimes it does backfire. And they say, you know, `Get into the '90s,' or, `Get into the late 20th century. You want a talking head. You want to create a format for a minute or two where it's just the candidate talking to camera.' It's really the same objection that the television people have. It's death. It won't work.

Alex Castellanos, who was Bob Dole's media guy and probably the leading Republican campaign, you know, consultant-media guy said, `It it is sort of like what they tried to do,' he said, `with Elvis, you know, on "Ed Sullivan" in the early '60s,' whenever that is. `Only show Elvis from the hips up because, you're not letting us bring all of the art form to play here.' In fact, he analogized 30-second spots to Picasso's comment that art is the lie that tells the truth. Now Alex believes that, and Alex believes that what they do is ultimately fine tune the things that the public cares most about whether it's the warts of their personality or whether it's—to go back to Chris— to go back to the '88 campaign where I first met Chris Edley; whether it's Willie Horton as the way to sort of crystallize everything we all feel and fear about race, and that's what works, and that's what the marketplace delivers us.

I think that, at one level, he's right, which is why—I mean, I think we have to work our way toward a discourse that gets better communication to the masses, and that doesn't mean more lengthy debates and stuff. Let us acknowledge the public will not sit still for this. But we can surely do better than where we are, which is why I think candidate on camera begins to get at it.

I was talking in the break with Paul Begala about the way they do it in Britain, [the] way they do it in other places. I think there's enough creativity in this culture that we can find a format that is better. But I think it's going to take an intrusion of the elites. I mean, this is what we're stuck in. We're in this vicious cycle. And I would just end with this thought: It's—it's very difficult to sort of revive politics at a time when the public and the popular culture is walking away from it. That's part of the challenge we face.

It is worth the effort, it is worth taking it in incremental steps, and I think free television time would be an important incremental step in that direction. It is

worth experimenting. If there's one thing this country is good at in all of its realms, is when something doesn't work, we figure out something new. And I think there is a thirst and a hunger for something new. A lot of you have talked about initiatives at the local level. I think they are fine, and you can probably have much less trouble getting energy at the local level than you will get at the national level at the moment, but let us understand how important the national level is in terms of setting the tone of the conversation for our public life. So let's think hard about how we organize that.

And the final thought is this: to peek very, very gently and gingerly into the future. You know, for 45 or 50 years, television has been our national town square. Television is the grid of our lives. It is an entertainment —it's a format that is conducive to entertainment. It tends to turn serious discourse into entertainment, but more than that, it tells us all what we're doing on 9:00 on Thursday night. `Well, we're going to watch "Seinfeld."' And what I'm trying to achieve is—let's borrow that audience aggregation. It's much more fragmented than it used to be, but it is still a place where you can get a lot of eyeballs into the same place at the same time. And let's try to revive that.

The trouble is that, 10 years down the road, I'm not sure we're going to all be doing the same thing at the same time. I mean, the most exciting and most fascinating thing it seems to me about to happen to this country is the collision of the Internet and television and the two cultures that they represent. Television—passive; you sit there. Somebody tells you what to watch and you watch it. The Internet—you know, you control everything and you make all your own decisions.

Now we just have digital television—it's about, probably, 18 months away from coming on the market—where these two technologies can be married. I think hundreds of billions of dollars will be made and lost by the media giants, whether it's Microsoft or Westinghouse or Disney, figuring out whether this new, ubiquitous thing in everybody's living room five, 10, 15, 20 years from now will behave more like the Internet or more like television.

But one thing that we can predict it may start to do is further fragment the way we hold the conversation. I don't know the answer to that; I do know that while we're still sort of in the old media on its last legs, we better damn well try to revive it to be ready for whatever the future brings. And I will leave it there and be happy to entertain your questions.