The Audacity to Win

The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama’s Historic Victory

David Plouffe
Prologue

David Axelrod and I left the Obama campaign headquarters election bunker in Chicago at 10:30 p.m. central time to humbling cheers from the knot of staffers who had been prepared for a long night of data crunching and narrow margins. Instead, they were downing beers and celebrating, having just watched all the networks announce the election of their boss as the forty-fourth president of the United States of America.

It was the end of long road. Axelrod and I had begun the journey walking together through an airport in November 2006, en route to our first meeting about the far-fetched prospect of Barack Obama's running for president. At the time we figured it was probably the only meeting that such an unlikely endeavor would yield.

Yet here we were, walking down the hallway of the high-rise that had housed our campaign for almost two years, on our way to greet the president-elect. As we departed the elevator and stepped into the lobby, the security guards broke into raucous cheers and tearful thank-yous. Their joy hit me with a jolt of reality that blaring televisions and hours of encouraging results from battleground states had somehow failed to convey.

"I'm having a hard time actually believing this," I said to Axelrod as we made our way into the street.

"I know," nodded Ax. "It's too big to comprehend right now."

We had just elected the president of the United States—an African American man, born to a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother, just four years out of the Illinois state senate. He had defeated the gold standard in both parties, Hillary Clinton and John McCain, to win in one of the biggest upsets in American political history.

The elation of these security guards, all African Americans, struck me
The press coverage and reports from our advance staff told us the crowd at nearby Grant Park was enormous and crackling with energy. We piled into a waiting motorcade and screamed down Lakeshore Drive; before it seemed possible, we began to see the crowd. The throngs on the outer edge of the park saw the motorcade approaching, and a roar of cheering supporters followed us all the way down the drive until we reached the security entrance. Axelrod, Gibbs, and I did not want to watch Obama speak from backstage, so we asked the advance staff to get us out with the crowd. We wanted to be swept up in the human wave of energy.

As I watched Barack Obama emerge onto the stage with his beautiful family, I found it difficult to contain my emotions. Was this really possible? Was this our first family? Obama delivered a phenomenal speech; at one point he thanked me and Axelrod personally, which was as surreal as it was embarrassing.

Then it was over. The Obamas and the Bidens embraced and joined hands, waved to the crowd, and strode off the stage.

Two years earlier, this historic moment would have seemed little more than a fantasy. It strained credibility—required a certain audacity, you might say—to believe that Barack Obama could wrest the Democratic nomination from the Clinton franchise, much less go on to win the presidency with 365 electoral votes, 7 million more popular votes than anyone who had ever run for president, and a higher vote percentage than any Democratic candidate besides FDR in 1936 and LBJ in 1964.

The remarkable Obama for President campaign, led by a once-in-a-generation candidate, had the audacity to win—and not just to win, but to do so with guts, defying conventional wisdom time and again. We talked to voters like adults and organized a grassroots movement of average citizens like the likes of which American politics had never seen.

It was not easy. At the beginning it was a stretch just to find office space and fill it with computers and phone lines. Taking the first halting steps of the Obama for President journey, most of us, me included, were more resolute than starry-eyed. We could hardly have realized, in signing up to work for this political long shot from Chicago, that we had gained a unique perch from which to watch American history unfold.
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Reloading for the General

Before we could plunge full force into the general election, we had to engage in a delicate dance with Hillary Clinton and the remnants of her campaign. Success in November demanded full party unity, and it fell to us to welcome all her political supporters, volunteers, and contributors with open and grateful arms.

The day after Barack clinched the nomination, Clinton held a conference call with many of her key political supporters. According to press reports that surfaced right after that, her supporters made clear they thought she needed to withdraw from the race and enthusiastically get behind Obama, to avoid any hint that she might, symbolically or otherwise, take her battle to the convention. Her campaign quickly sent out word that she would be holding an event in Washington, D.C., that coming Saturday, June 7, at which she would end her campaign and formally endorse Barack. Relief washed over us. After eighteen months of combat, there would be no more attacks from our fiercest opponent.

 Clinton and Obama met on June 5, two days after we formally clinched the nomination and two days before Clinton’s formal concession. Hillary suggested to Barack—they personally handled much of the logistics around the meeting—that they meet at California senator Dianne Feinstein’s house in Washington. I was not wild about having it at the home of someone who had supported Clinton so vigorously, but Feinstein was Barack’s colleague as well, and we wanted to tread very carefully. My view—and Barack probably felt more strongly about this than I did—was that we should say yes to anything that was relatively easy and was not clearly against our strategic interests. Given that, we agreed to the setting.

By this point we had a press pool with us around the clock, following Obama's every move. I did not want the meeting to become a media circus and certainly didn't want news of it to break before it even started. The day of the meeting, we were on our maiden general-election campaign trip in Virginia, and at my direction, we sent the press covering Obama to Dulles Airport and had them fly back to Chicago, where Obama would be spending the night. They assumed he was in the motorcade and would be flying back with them. He had actually peeled off after the last campaign event and was on route to Feinstein’s house. We chartered another plane to take him back to Chicago.

Once they were on board, the press could see from the empty seat up front that Obama was not present. Poor Robert Gibbs. He was on the plane and knew he was going to be drawn and quartered by a gaggle of reporters. But he understood the strategic value of keeping this meeting under wraps and agreed that it was worth the cost to maintain discretion.

Still, I was happy not to be his seatmate on this particular flight. A little while after Obama took off for Feinstein’s, Gibbs sent a small group of us an e-mail: “They now know he’s not on the plane and it’s mutiny. When should I talk to them?”

I e-mailed back: “After you take off.”

Gibbs later described to me the relentless and very personal pummeling he received on the flight to Chicago. “Robert, Robert, Robert,” they barked at him, their voices running together when he went back to face them. His name was perhaps the only polite term employed.

Put plainly, the press were furious. In the days after, we received many strongly worded e-mails and letters complaining about “an unprecedented breach of trust.” I understood their frustration. They had been hijacked and misled. Despite some deep frustrations with how the campaign was covered, the press plays an invaluable role in the process that must be respected by those of us on the other side of the fence. But there is almost no escaping the ever-present media and its microscopic coverage of modern presidential politics. Occasionally a campaign has to have space to breathe.

News of the Clinton-Obama “summit” broke as the meeting got under way, as our abducted press contingent deduced the reason for the deception and elicited confirmation from the Clinton camp. Details such as venue and exact participants were not yet public. Later the two campaigns issued a joint statement confirming the meeting that simply said, “Senator Clinton and Senator Obama met tonight and had a productive discussion about the important work that needs to be done to succeed in November.” That alone was heralded as
big news: a joint statement from former enemy combatants was further proof that the primary was indeed over.

Barack called me to report on the meeting as he was en route to the airport. "No blood?" I inquired. He laughed. "Actually, we had a nice conversation. Some reminiscing about funny moments along the way, none of the tough ones. She said all the right things and I think she meant them. She's established a committee of three people from her campaign to sit down with us and work through issues. I told her you would be our point person. She asked that you call Cheryl Mills to set up a meeting."

"A committee?" I responded incredulously. "We're not negotiating a hostage release here. The general election is in less than six months. I don't have time for the Yalta peace talks."

Obama laughed but was firm. "I know you don't have the time," he said, "But I need you to deal with this first. Try to make progress and hopefully you can delegate a lot of it on the back end. We need to work out a lot of things quickly, so we can move on. My sense in talking to Hillary is the only big sticking point will be the debt. It sounds bigger than we knew and they clearly want our help on it."

I told Obama I would call Cheryl and rope in Bob Bauer, our attorney, as my wing man.

Cheryl Mills had worked in the White House counsel's office during Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, and she was heading up the Clinton delegation. Also involved were Bob Barnett, a leading Washington lawyer who was very close to Hillary, and Mandy Moore, a longtime Democratic operative and former White House political director.

I sent Cheryl a meeting agenda that ran the gamut: how to get the Clinton donors and volunteers involved; when and where Hillary and Barack should first campaign together; the Democratic Convention, which would necessitate its own set of complex discussions; Bill Clinton's role; how much time Hillary could give us for surrogate campaigning; and, finally, the debt. She easily agreed to the schedule, which came as a surprise. I was conditioned from the last year and a half to believe all interactions going forward would be like pulling teeth.

In many ways, watching Hillary concede that weekend made our victory more real to me than did the speech Obama had given in the Twin Cities. The race had been conducted at such a breakneck pace for months and months, and she had hung on so long and so defiantly that it was difficult to believe it was truly over.

Our entire HQ gathered on Saturday to watch. There was unanimous agreement that her speech was phenomenal. She thanked her supporters and famously said, "Although we weren't able to shut that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about eighteen million cracks in it," a reference to the number of votes she received in the Democratic primary. They had a lot to be proud of.

Her endorsement of Barack—and more important, her call for all those who supported her to follow suit—was unambiguous, clear, and compelling. We couldn't have asked for anything more. Under what must have been painful circumstances, she delivered a ten-strike.

Bauer and I met with her committee for several hours, and the discussion ran swimmingly, with the exception of one topic—the topic that dwarfed all others.

Their debt was well over $30 million. Hillary had loaned her campaign over $10 million, which she gallantly wrote off, but they still owed more than $20 million to campaign vendors large and small, and that money had to come from somewhere. It was clear they expected us to take responsibility for erasing all or most of this figure. I thought this was preposterous. Given that our fund-raising would have to stay competitive with the entire Republican machine and all its offshoots as we headed toward the general election, we simply could not take on the Clinton debt.

This was going to be thorny, if not downright toxic. I think they believed we could send out a couple of e-mails and generate enough money to erase their debt. They clearly did not understand our supporters, or divine the extent of the hard feelings still lingering in the ranks of the victors.

We knew our supporters would respond very poorly to a request for Clinton debt assistance. First, it was just too soon after eighteen months of pitched battle. It would take some time for things to cool off. Second, and more important, many of our small donors were making a real sacrifice to give us twenty-five or fifty dollars every once in a while, and they did so because they believed fervently in our unique candidate and message. They would consider debt assistance a "politics as usual" ask and not part of our core mission. And many of our supporters who were new to politics would be downright disgusted by this political deal making.
As I saw it, it had been their choice alone to keep racking up debt, and, in fact, their continued spending had forced us to do the same, making it more urgent that we focus on rebuilding our own coffers. At this point, McCain had more money than we did.

We agreed that we would ask the members of our National Finance Committee, our strongest fund-raisers, to write checks to pay down the Clinton debt and to raise money from others to do so. Ultimately we raised almost $2 million for them in the aftermath of the primary. The Clinton folks were not pleased by this figure and likely believed we were only going through the motions. But we tried hard. Obama made some calls himself, and even he ran into fierce resistance. I had numerous conversations with people who had previously come through on everything I asked of them. To this they said, "David, I simply can't do it. I can't ask people whom we need to give money to Obama for America and the DNC to write a check for Clinton debt."

On every other score, the two camps worked very well together, and Hillary campaigned her heart out for us through the fall. For both groups, the suspicions toward the other waned over time, as it became clear we could work together, resolve issues, and listen. But it did take time. Obama took the lead on our side when it came to fence-mending, sending a clear signal within the campaign that he wanted no dancing in the end zone; the message was: work smart and welcome Clinton staff and supporters with open arms. When I occasionally complained about the words or deeds of someone in the Clinton camp, he reminded me to take it easy. "Put down the sword, Plouffe," he would say. "It's over."

Primaries are like family disputes—the wounds can be deep and long-lasting. The 2008 primary was fierce; at times it got downright nasty and personal. For most of a year and a half I woke up wanting nothing else but to destroy the Clinton campaign (I'm sure they felt the same way about us), and I believed passionately that we needed to turn the page, not only on George Bush but within our party.

Still, when you go through an experience like we did, you also develop a grudging respect for what your opponents do well. You actually start to feel a certain connection with the enemy with whom you shared the arena; after all, they're the only other people who truly understand the battle just waged.

Barack Obama was a better candidate than his campaign. Almost all successful candidates are. Some days the gulf was wide (see D-Punjab, Texas, Wright) other times his campaign played a complementary role in his victory (our electoral strategy and discipline, harnessing the grassroots energy he inspired, innovating campaign use of technology and message tools).

In Hillary's case, I believe the gulf was consistently wide. Ultimately candidates have to take responsibility for their campaigns, but they need to have strong staff to handle a lot of strategy and planning details. And it was clear that Hillary's staff did not understand delegates as well as they should have, did not appreciate the role Iowa could play in resetting the race, and made a host of other strategic and tactical miscalculations that opened the door for us.

No candidate should be expected to be the lead strategist on those matters. Hillary was first and foremost responsible for going out every day and making the best possible case for her candidacy. And she performed at a very high level. She won most of the primary debates; as the campaign dragged on and she became the underdog, she really hit her stride. She got to a compelling economic message before we did. As we started playing more of an inside game to lock down superdelegates, she skillfully took on the underdog role and got enormous mileage out of it.

She had to know for months that her odds of winning were absurdly low. Yet day after day she campaigned effectively and with gusto, only rarely betraying her political position in the race and becoming a real voice for economically struggling voters. Very few human beings could pull off what she did. It was a remarkable and often frustrating dynamic to watch from the front row, and I couldn't wait to have her out campaigning for us; I thought she could be a terrific advocate, particularly in making an economic case for Obama's candidacy. But for this to work, we'd first have to earn each other's trust, no small feat after everything we'd just been through.

The primaries took us to forty-eight states and six territories. In that respect, the length of the contest served us well. By the time we crossed the delegate threshold, we had built organizations in every battleground state except Michigan and Florida, and Obama had campaigned in them all.

As we plowed into the general election, core principles developed during the primary helped guide us. We had no time to come up with new approaches, even had we wanted to. We were three months behind John McCain.

First, as in the primary, we studied our opponent. We thought about his campaign as carefully as we thought about our own.
We had enormous respect for McCain's potential strength as a Republican nominee. He was their only possible nominee with existing and perhaps even majority support among independent voters, the group that often decides the presidency. He had a history of supporting some reforms, most notably the campaign finance legislation that bears his name, and was celebrated by the press for being a "maverick" willing to buck his party. This reputation made him very dangerous to us and our stance as the true change and reform candidate. However, in pursuit of his party's nomination, McCain had embraced the Bush agenda whole hog, including items like the Bush tax cuts, which he had originally opposed as too large and irresponsible. We assumed he would now try to unwind much of that during the general election, to try to reclaim the mantle of independence.

McCain's camp was also asserting that they could peel off a healthy percentage of Democrats, especially the so-called Hillary Democrats: older, downscale whites. While we never believed this claim was valid, based on historical voting patterns, it was something we had to watch carefully. McCain also was unique among Republicans in his standing and potential strength with Latino voters, who could make the difference in battlegrounds like Florida, New Mexico, Nevada, and Colorado. Bush received 44 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2004, and we could ill afford to have McCain match that number. This was another narrative the press sank their teeth into; because we lost Hispanic voters decisively to Hillary in the primaries, the conventional wisdom was we would struggle mightily to earn their votes in the general.

While Latino voters bore watching, the notion that primary trends carried over into the general rested on flawed logic, and defied history. In fact, our initial general-election research showed that some of the groups we struggled with in the primary—older women, Latino voters, union households—would be bulwarks for us in the run for the White House. And some of our bases in the primary—upper-income voters, male independents—would prove a much tougher slog. Forests were destroyed with all the stories about our potential problems with Hillary's primary voters.

Presidential races are often covered as if they are a national race. This is far from true. In the 2008 election, much of the media focused on national polls, paying far too little attention to what was unfolding on the ground in the battleground states. When the new Gallup poll came out each day, for example, the cable networks treated it as breaking news. But in actuality the national polls had little to say about the real story of the race.

Winning the presidency requires piecing together a combination of states to reach 270 electoral votes. That is all that matters. In 2000, for the second time, a presidential candidate lost the popular vote and won the presidency—and George W. Bush lost the raw vote by a healthy margin. We now turned to Electoral College votes with the same laser focus we had trained on delegates during the primary. "Two-seventy" was our new mantra.

Our plan was to attempt to run the most muscular state campaigns ever assembled in battleground states. If we were successful, the campaigns in those states would have a deep impact, potentially creating a clear departure from the national polls. TV and radio ads, Internet advertising, historically large grassroots campaigns focused on turnout, voter registration, and aggressive in-state press operations—all these would create their own dynamic, one that didn't necessarily track with conventional polling techniques. Of course, national news would still matter and things like the conventions and the debates would break through battlegrounds and nonbattlegrounds alike.

Most of the country—those who lived in safely red or blue states—did not truly witness the 2008 presidential campaign. The real contest occurred in only about sixteen states, in which swing voters in particular bunched up against the campaign at every turn—at their doors; on their phones; on their local news, TV shows, and radio programs; and on their computers on the Internet. In these states, we trotted out the candidate and our surrogates, built large staffs and budgets to support our organizational work, and mounted frenzied and diversified advertising campaigns. They were the canvases on which we sketched the election.

From an electoral perspective, nothing was more important to us strategi-


appeal would not be enough. We needed to be able to mount individual state campaigns hearty enough to meet our vote goals. Ample funding was a piece of that puzzle, but far more important was the strength and growth of our grassroots movement in these states as we got closer to the election.

To figure out which states we should target, we focused our analysis on determining where we could credibly get to a win number, 49 or 50 percent (in most cases third-party candidates would skimp a few votes in some states). We modeled many different scenarios, playing with various turnouts among certain demographics, different scenarios for how undecided voters could break, and the effect of increased voter registration. Our calculus took into account patterns in each state’s voting history, demographic analysis, our own research, and some old-fashioned gut instinct. We put states through the paces under various scenarios to see how they held up and if they gave us a reasonable path to victory.

This was one of the most important and enjoyable exercises in the campaign. Our data team, led by Hildebrand, Carson, and Jen O’Malley (our battleground-states director, whom we brought in from Edwards’s campaign during the spring), developed a range of scenarios in each state that ran the gamut from optimistic to pessimistic.

I met with this group every couple of days in May, as we were still winding down from the primary, to review where we stood in the general. My strategic outlook was that we needed to play on the widest map possible in terms of targeted states. In 2000 and 2004, our party was forced to have its fate rest on the outcome of one state. That would not happen in 2008.

Consistent with the philosophy of the campaign, we eschewed headfakes. We wouldn’t target a state we couldn’t win solely to draw McCain into additional contests, forcing him to spend what would likely be his thinner resources more diffusely. Where that occurred, it would simply be a derivative benefit. If a state went through our obstacle course and came out looking good, it meant we believed we could win it.

I also didn’t want to play it safe. We were likely to be rolling through a fairly favorable climate politically and financially once we got into the fall, and we knew we would have a more robust grassroots presence. Rather than spend a lot of resources defending every state won by John Kerry in 2004, we gambled that most of these states would likely stay the course without much push from us; if we ran into trouble, we could always sweep in and correct our difficulty with a rush of time and money. I wanted our orientation to be almost exclu-

ively offensive. This would increase our ability to win tougher red states and could potentially prevent McCain from playing offense himself. His campaign was prattling on to the press about how he could win states like Connecticut, New Jersey, and California. We didn’t take the bait. Our goal was to force them to defend Bush states, and we saw little to no evidence that they could add to the Bush Electoral College margin. If our plan worked, we would wake up the morning of November 4 with many different winning combinations, giving us greater margin for error. We could lose many of our targets but still get to 270. McCain, on the other hand, would have to run the whole table.

The states John Kerry won yielded 292 electoral votes. While some would unquestionably fall in our column, others looked likely but not certain. There was no doubt Michigan and Pennsylvania would be fiercely contested, and we could not afford to lose either. If we did, it would force us to win a much higher percentage of our targets than we felt comfortable with. Given this, those two big states would get the full treatment; we would spare no expense and they would get a lot of Obama time (and Pennsylvania already had in the primary).

Four additional Kerry states were critical strategically: First, in the Northwest, Oregon and Washington. These two states are always key battlegrounds and were very close in 2000 and 2004. The Democratic nominees spent a lot of time and money ensuring they went blue on Election Day. This year they looked to be tilting heavily Democratic, and even more important, they were states where Obama performed unusually strongly with independents. We also had very strong organizations built up during the primary in both Oregon and Washington.

With these factors in mind, we decided to gamble a bit and not fully target these states—no media budget, very modest staff presence, and no candidate visits. As the race unfolded, McCain gave us a big advantage by not fully engaging in either state—keeping them out of play took a couple of his potential moves off the table. We were delighted. Having Oregon and Washington in our column from the start let us devote resources to fighting McCain on his turf.

In the Midwest, Minnesota and Wisconsin were also traditionally fierce battlegrounds. Wisconsin was decided by less than one percentage point in both 2000 and 2004. It was clear McCain was going to go all-in on these states, but we took a more conservative approach. We planned a more rigorous presence than in Oregon and Washington, but less so than in the Bush states we
were trying to convert. These states possessed two of our most muscular grassroots organizations in the country, and we brought in talented staff to work with an army of volunteers, who would make up for the absence of a live candidate and media buys.

Obama's strength in the Northwest and upper Midwest was never properly appreciated during the primary, when electability was being debated as a criterion for winning the nomination. In the Midwest, Obama had regional appeal, and in both geographic areas, he was outperforming with independents. For a Democrat running in any of these states, combining a solid and energized base with a lead among independents was game, set, match. Perhaps, other Democratic nominees would have won all four of these states in 2008, but I believe they would have had to fight much harder than we did. And money, time, and focus are zero-sum factors; any spent in your own backyard is unavailable for launching an assault on your opponents.

The list of Bush states we were putting through the paces went as follows: west to east: Nevada, Montana, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Indiana, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and New Hampshire. This is a big list and once again flowed from our belief that we should not follow a conventional playbook. We looked at the Electoral College with fresh eyes, ran the traps, and based our strategy on our analysis, not on preconceived notions about what a Democrat could win.

We believed Iowa and New Mexico presented the most solid opportunities for takeaways. McCain did not compete seriously in Iowa during the 2000 or 2008 caucuses, choosing to start his primary campaign in New Hampshire. Conversely, we had spent more time in Iowa than anywhere else so far and had a huge organization on the ground. New Mexico was strongly trending Democratic, and even though it neighbored McCain's home state of Arizona, we saw no sign that he would have outsized appeal to the Hispanic voters that made up a hefty percentage of New Mexico's electorate.

If we held on to all the Kerry states and won Iowa and New Mexico, we were sitting at 264 electoral votes, just 6 away from victory. With no remaining slam dunks, though, we needed a broad set of targets for those last votes. We could lose almost every other state if we won just one state with five or more electoral votes (a 260–269 tie would be decided by the U.S. House of Representatives, which the Democratic Party would almost assuredly control).

All things being equal, New Hampshire would have joined Iowa and New Mexico on the list of Bush states leaning toward Obama. The Democrats were in ascendance there, having won just about all there was to win in 2006. But McCain had a special relationship with voters in New Hampshire—they had given him a huge win in each of his runs, and we were a little gun-shy after Hillary had the rug pulled out from under us in the primary.

Virginia was a cornerstone to our strategy. Consequently, it was the first state Obama visited after having formally secured the nomination. We went to southwestern Virginia, the rural, more conservative area; a Democrat has to avoid being routed here in order to win the state. Soldiering into historically unfriendly territory sent a very important message both in Virginia and nationally: we were going to fight for votes in every corner of every battleground state. We also thought our early endorser, Governor Tim Kaine, would help us develop a solid road map and execute our game plan.

Virginia had changed enormously through the decade, after years of Republican dominance, Democrats now routinely won statewide office. It was also a relatively large state, offering thirteen Electoral College votes. Winning Virginia from McCain would severely limit his options. He would have to win a large Kerry state or the race was over. We thought Virginia was prime real estate for us, and fortunately, the McCain camp did not believe they could lose there until it was too late.

McCain met several of our other targets with similar indifference. His campaign told the press we could not win North Carolina, Montana, Indiana, or, remarkably, Florida, so they would not compete there. This gave us a huge head start in states we believed were certainly in play. All in all, it was a huge gift.

My personal favorite target was the 2nd Congressional District of Nebraska. Nebraska and Maine are the two states that do not award all their Electoral College votes based on statewide results. Instead, the winner of the raw vote in each congressional district receives one Electoral College vote. We felt confident we would carry all of Maine's (though McCain made an ill-considered play for the northern congressional district), and it was clear McCain would carry two of Nebraska's three districts comfortably. But we thought we could steal the 2nd District, around Omaha, where our organization was strong, and we already had ads on the air to reach Iowa voters.

The political history nerd in me would have loved to win 270–268, through a combination of all the Kerry states, Iowa, New Mexico, Nevada, and one vote from Nebraska's 2nd Congressional District to put us over the top. I mulled to
Obama about this scenario, remarking how unusual and historic it would be. In some ways it would resemble our primary win, where we stitched together an unlikely electoral path. "Flows are, that's interesting daydreaming," he said, laughing. "Let's try not to have it all come down to Nebraska 2."

We knew both campaigns would compete aggressively in Missouri, Ohio, Colorado, and Nevada. We thought Ohio would be close no matter what; it was one of the few states where we did not think we could fundamentally alter the electorate, a top strategic goal in all battleground states. Because it had been ground zero in the Bush-Kerry race, turnout and registration levels were already exceedingly high. Even if our enthusiasm levels were higher than McCain's, and he had some drop-off from Bush's turnout (a distinct possibility), we would still need to win the persuasion war with swing voters on the economy.

We believed Missouri, usually considered a bellwether, was an outlier in 2008 and trending a bit against us. If we won there, it would be by the thinnest of margins. The state had eleven electoral votes, though, and McCain was investing heavily, suggesting to us that they saw something that concerned them. In the end, Missouri was a bridge too far, but we hung in there, and forced McCain to as well.

Colorado and Nevada were great takeaway opportunities. Neither state broke Democratic or was particularly close in 2000 or 2004, but the growing influence of Latino voters and Obama's appeal with western independents gave us a great shot to pick them both up. Expanding the electorate through voter registration could have a meaningful effect in both states, and we thought younger voters could really help juice turnout favorably.

As I played with the map, a dozen times a day, I kept coming back to a scenario in which we won the White House by holding all the Kerry states and winning Iowa, New Mexico, and either Colorado or Nevada. This was our most conservative win formula. Of course, we would have liked the biggest margin possible, but we all tried to keep our appetites focused on what we had to have, not what we wanted to devour. "I'm not really interested in spending my time dreaming up landslide scenarios," Obama told us. "Let's just make sure we hit 270. I don't want to get 260 wishing for 360."

Perhaps wishing for 360, we initially targeted Georgia, North Dakota, and Alaska. We actually never had a credible path to 50 percent in these states but thought that if the two third-party candidates could get a few points—and Bob Barr, the libertarian candidate, was from Georgia—we might be able to
because we had suggested their states didn't hold the key to the election, and that this had somehow hurt their feelings, was just silly. As to the first point, we were used to outsiders finding fault with our strategy.

Writing in an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times, one prominent commentator suggested our strategy of widening the playing field could doom us and that investing in states like Virginia, Colorado, North Carolina, and Indiana was too risky a proposition. "If McCain pulls off a victory in November," the piece opined, "there will be a lot of postmortem scrutiny about the prudence of playing it safe versus the dream of shooting for the moon."

In retrospect, I should have offered the press a simpler visual technique for understanding our plan. We would hold all the Kerry states and flip Iowa and New Mexico. That puts us on the threshold. McCain at that point would be like a hockey goalie, and we would pepper him with an onslaught of shots. He might stop Ohio, Florida, Missouri, Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, Nebraska 2, Nevada, North Carolina, and Colorado. But if Virginia slipped past him into the goal Game over. His margin for error would be close to zero. That's what we were setting out to do.

We could do it only by growing and strengthening our powerful grassroots movement. We ended the primary with over 2 million contributors and more than 7 million people on our e-mail list. Almost all the contributors were volunteers (highly unusual in politics), and we had many more volunteers who had not yet contributed. Our record on that front was promising. We had what businesses call a high conversion rate. I referred to it as the enthusiasm gap. In the primary, our supporters were more committed and passionate than Hillary's had been. She drew plenty of diehards, and they hung some big losses on us. As a percentage, though, a greater number of Barack's supporters were willing to work ten or twenty hours a week, make multiple contributions, and convince others to climb aboard.

We thought the enthusiasm gap would be even more pronounced in the general election. Democrats were wild about replacing Bush. Republicans were less excited about a third GOP term. Bush's performance had left even some hardcore Republican activists disillusioned and unmotivated, further depressing enthusiasm. And though McCain had a core of passionate supporters, he had a very thin base of hypermotivated voters. Many on the right were still skeptical of him; they found him too willing to oppose the party in the past and distrusted him on some social issues. Of course, this dynamic had an upside for him as well, it explained why he was attractive to many indepen-
tired, and fearless field organizers. And always we made sure to stress to volunteers that they had standing behind them a national HQ—and most important, a candidate—that believed in them and would make sure their work was strategically sound and received adequate resources.

We made some of our key strategic and targeting decisions based on the belief that we could grow the grassroots movement to this level and that we would get maximum productivity from this engorged group of supporters. Without them, we could not have targeted states like North Carolina and Indiana. For one, we would not have had the money. But most important were the volunteers on the ground; we could not convert enough Indiana Republicans unless we had their neighbors talking to them about why they were supporting Obama, explaining his positions and defending him against McCain's attacks.

If we did not register enough African Americans and young voters in North Carolina and then turn them out on Election Day, we could not win. Facing a traditional electorate meant we shouldn't even bother with a state like North Carolina, no matter how much money we spent. Quite simply, money was no substitute for committed volunteers. Without question, we had to grow the campaigns in these states enough to shoulder the massive workload. Without our volunteer army, our strategy of a wide electoral map and multiple avenues to victory would have been the fantasy many people believed it to be.

One decision we had to make quickly as we formally entered the general election was whether to participate in the public funding of federal elections. Candidates who agree to accept federal taxpayer funding—in 2008 it was $85 million per candidate—get a check from the government in return for ceasing their campaign's fund-raising after their party convention. The government put this system into place after Watergate, and since then all presidential candidates have agreed to public funding.

In 2004 this cap especially harmed Kerry because the Democratic convention was held a month earlier than the Republicans'. Both campaigns received the same amount to spend, but Bush had to pay for only eight weeks compared to Kerry's twelve, a huge advantage. Kerry later told me that staying within the system was one of the biggest mistakes they made.

Axelrod and I saw what happened in 2004 from a unique vantage. The DNC hired our firm to produce ads for the so-called independent expenditure, or IE, unit of the committee. Since Kerry would not be raising money for his campaign after the convention, he asked his contributors and other supporters to give money to the DNC instead. The idea was to have the DNC supplement the campaign's activities.

As it turned out, largely because there was so much energy in our party to defeat Bush, the DNC raised far more than had been predicted. In fact, we ended up spending more on advertising alone that fall than Kerry did on his whole campaign, well over $100 million. But there was one big catch: to honor the public financing agreement, campaign finance laws make it illegal for the party to communicate with the campaign. So nothing we did could be coordinated with Kerry or any of his people.

As a result, while we spent over $100 million, we did so inefficiently and with many tools not at our disposal. We had no access to the candidate, and so believed our role should be to run negative and comparative ads, allowing the campaign itself to run more positive ads since they could actually film Kerry. That roughly worked. But we spent as much time trying to figure out what we should do as we did actually doing it once we figured it out. Our first rule was "Do No Harm." We wanted to make sure everything we were doing was strategically aligned with the Kerry campaign, but since we couldn't talk to them, this was a dilemma.

We looked for smoke signals every day to determine if we were on the right course. Was the campaign sending us messages through the press about an issue we should hop on? Their television point levels went down in the St. Louis media market—is that because they're preparing to throw in the towel or feeling more confident? They're not buying radio heavily but Bush is—does that reflect a lack of resources or a belief that there aren't many available voices in those markets? We were playing second chair at best, just trying to divine their cues and strategy and act accordingly.

Kerry also could not afford to support a field and organizing campaign, so almost all his groundwork was done by the DNC, state Democratic parties, and outside groups. This situation offered a clear lesson, one that stuck with me—if you believed in running a strong ground game based on people leading the change in their own communities, nothing could be more problematic than having zero control over that operation.

The 2004 experience carried a lot of weight with me as we worked through the 2008 funding decision. It gave me a deeper understanding of the system's
drawbacks as they would relate to our campaign. So important was this decision that I believed we owed it to our party and country to have a very clear view of how the funding decision might affect our chances of winning.

Complicating the decision was the campaign suggestion we would “aggressively pursue” an agreement with the Republican nominee to stay within public funding. Between 2007 and 2008, we never should have set out so bright a marker that early in the campaign, when we barely had the lights in our office on, that we were absolutely concerned with making sure the reform community and elites like the New York Times editorial board, which care deeply about these issues, would look favorably on our approach. And honestly, we weren’t doing much thinking in February 2007 about our general election campaign. We could hardly see past Iowa into New Hampshire then.

If we opted out, we knew we would be heavily criticized by the media, campaign finance watchdogs, and, most importantly, McCain, who had made it very clear he was staying in the system and would consider it an outright lie and a breach of public faith if we did not.

Then an issue questionnaire from the obscure Midwest Democracy Network popped up. Our policy staff had filled out hundreds of these questionnaires throughout the campaign, but this one, completed in the fall of 2007, really came back to bite us. When asked whether we would commit to being in the federal system, our team had responded, “Yes... We will aggressively pursue an agreement...” We had never before or since used that one word—“yes.” It was declarative, and it unquestionably stated we’d be in no matter what the G.O.P. nominee did.

The answer blindsided all of us at the senior level of the campaign. It was an unforced error and would make a decision to opt out of the federal system extra painful.

We had to look at this decision through two lenses. First, Barack Obama had been a reformer in practice, accomplishment, and outlook since he was elected to the Illinois state senate in 1996. He had championed tough ethics and campaign finance reforms in Illinois, the first in a generation. After arriving in Washington, he led the fight for tough new lobbying restrictions, drawing the wrath of insiders and colleagues from both parties. “You are going to cost us the majority!” one prominent Democratic senator had yelled. “We are in power now and you’re going to take away some of the advantages that allow us to stay there.”

Reform was in Obama’s DNA. We knew McCain would try to make us pay a price, but that was of less concern than making sure whatever we did squared with Obama’s reformer credentials and instincts.

The second lens focused on the practical considerations. Which path gave the campaign the best chance of success? I felt we had a severing obligation to win this race—not just for Barack or on behalf of the staff, but from an absolute belief that we could not afford another four years of George Bush’s domestic and foreign policies. To my mind, we needed to look through this second lens first, before we got to the harder question of principle.

If we decided to stay within the system, the DNC would be the major spender on our side—we would have our $85 million in federal funds, and I figured the party would raise at least $250 million, almost all from the existing Obama donor base. But a healthy percentage of our contributors were Republicans, independents, and nonpartisan types who would not give money to the DNC, even if they were asked to by Obama.

If we opted out, I thought it was safe to assume the campaign would raise $350 million and the DNC $100 million. The party’s portion could be spent in coordination with our money; it would not be an independent expenditure with all the legal barriers prohibiting communication. DNC chairman Howard Dean and his senior staff had prepared well for the moment our party chose its nominee; they were ready to “hand the keys over,” as Dean put it. We could essentially subsume the DNC into the campaign and gain control of all their resources as well as of our own.

The overall difference in funding would be around $100 million, not chump change. Sacrificing this added cash would mean we either had to pare our list of target battlegrounds or run less rigorous campaigns in each. These were highly unappealing options.

More important than the dollar discrepancy was the control that would be ceded in the campaign. With only $85 million, we would find ourselves in Kerry’s position, unable to afford a field organization or a broad range of advertising. Instead, the DNC and outside groups, with their far larger financial resources, would be forced to take the field and airwaves for us.

And all their decisions would be made without our input. They would invariably be running a negative health care ad in a market where we would have preferred a tax cut comparative. And since tone was so important to our campaign—we did not want traditional low-blow negative ads run on our behalf—this factor took on added weight.
Most painfully, taking the federal funds meant losing control of our secret weapon: we would have to largely outsource our entire grassroots ground campaign to the DNC. As with fund-raising, there were many people volunteering for us who would offer their help in the name of Obama. If these people were forced to volunteer through the Democratic Party, no matter how clearly the mission was stated, we feared we could lose up to 20 percent of our volunteers.

Finally, nothing would be under one roof. One of the central tenets of our campaign was to look at everything together, not stack them into individual silos labeled media, press, field, and so on. We wanted everything synched up so we could keep our communications tight and coordinated, and maximize the value of all possible data points when making decisions.

I wanted a campaign in every battleground state with a robust enough field and advertising budget to address all our needs and to deal with whatever attacks McCain and his outside henchmen threw our way. Staying in the federal system would seriously impede our ability to mount the kind of campaign that left no stone unturned. We needed to be clear-eyed about that.

I thought if we opted out of the system, we would also enjoy a significant financial advantage over McCain. Our sense was that his campaign would feel they could not raise enough money to justify opting out. McCain lacked a powerful online fund-raising program, and he would have to do a lot more traditional fund-raising events than we did. This would take up a lot of his time, pulling him out of battleground states. From this perspective, it would make more sense to stick with the devil you know and let the RNC raise the money.

I thought this would be a grave mistake for them. The decision was not just about total dollars. More important than resource disparity would be a "control gap." If we were out and he was in, he would be at the mercy of the RNC and outside groups, while we controlled our own destiny.

For example, in October, it would be likely that in Cleveland, Ohio, McCain could afford to run only one ad a week. To supplement this, the RNC would then need to run their own ad (or two), and several outside groups would also have to get on the air for him. And all this would happen with the threat of felony prosecution guaranteeing that no communication beyond smoke signals was taking place between the candidate and his outside help.

Conversely, if we opted out, we would be able to run the positive ad we thought was in our best interest, a comparative or negative ad, and other ads geared to different demographics, like seniors or middle-aged women. We would also have the resources—and more important, a fully coordinated strategy—to deal with any attacks, no matter where they were coming from.

So from a practical perspective, opting out seemed like the right move. With that settled, we turned to the principle questions. As far as how opting out of the federal system squared with our claim that Obama had been and would be a reformer, there was quite a lot to recommend it. First of all, we all felt very, very good about how we were raising our money. Obama was the first presidential nominee to ban contributions to his campaign and the national party (DNC) from PACs and lobbyists. Despite McCain's talk and record on reform, his campaign was scooping up all the insider money they could find.

We had achieved what many consider the ideal of campaign reform—receiving a lot of small contributions from a lot of people. Our average contribution was under $100, and our donor base comprised a diverse portrait of America: teachers, retirees, small-business owners, farmers, students. I certainly felt that our present fund-raising method was a lot cleaner than what we would be forced to do if we stayed in the system.

The maximum allowable contribution to the campaign was $2,300. If we opted in, and had to turn our attention to raising money for the DNC (though we could have no knowledge or say in their spending), the limit would be just over $30,000. The McCain campaign had already done numerous RNC fund-raising events with lobbyists, where each attendee was asked for $30,000. And shadowy outside groups would have almost no limits. If we stayed in the federal system, these groups on our side would kick into high gear. Very wealthy individuals and interest groups would write, in some cases, multimillion-dollar checks, with little outside accountability when it came to how that money would be spent. It was clear to me which of these pathways was the more questionable.

Whatever we decided, I was determined not to make a decision out of fear of some hypocritical lectures from John McCain about breaking our word. There is also a federal financing system in the primaries, and when McCain's campaign launched in the middle of 2007, he signaled that he would take the money. Before that point, they had sent the clear message that they would not be bound by limits. McCain signed his own name to loan documents in
December of 2007, using the promise of federal money as collateral. Without the loan, McCain might well have lost to Mitt Romney in New Hampshire, ending his campaign.

Yet once McCain wrapped up his nomination in March 2008, he reversed course and said he would not be participating in the federal primary system. The reason was politically transparent: our primary would still be dragged on for some time and they wanted to have maximum financial flexibility to wage what was in essence a general-election campaign for those five months before the GOP convention. This reversal undercut any moral authority he might claim on campaign finance reform.

Obama and I talked about this issue a lot through the late spring and into early June. In the beginning he was genuinely torn—all things being equal, he was an instinctive reformer who was determined to win. Ax also played a part in these discussions. Like me, he was determined we not enter the general with one arm tied behind our back. But Ax is more sensitive to press criticism than I am and wondered if we could have our cake and eat it, too. He suggested opting out of the federal system but limiting contributions to, say, under $250.

The idea sounded appealing. But when our finance staff ran the numbers, it became clear this option would produce the worst of both worlds: we would not raise enough money to justify the pummeling we would take. Meanwhile, Ax had shared this idea with Obama, who mused about it in a press interview. I immediately sent them both an e-mail brainstorming further trial balloons.

More than any of us, Obama was living the way we raised our money; maybe it wasn’t pure, but it was as close to the ideal as had been achieved in presidential politics. Out on the trail, he met our grassroots donors all the time and even called up some of them unprompted, to try to stay connected with the ground.

The biggest two categories of donors to our campaign were retirees and students. I doubt that has ever been the case in American politics, and it’s all the more remarkable that these are two groups filled with members who are often living on very fixed budgets. But their dedication was unwavering and inspiring. After the campaign, we got an e-mail from a college student named Brandon Humble, who described how he found the money to make several donations to us. "I didn’t eat out, grabbed some ramen on the weekends instead, and kicked in ten to Barack’s campaign," he wrote. "I didn’t take the girl to a movie, just had drinks together, kicked in another ten. Small things.

But it was my belief that there were millions of us, scraping what we could together, and through the small things and the small people, headed by the campaign, a movement was created."

We also had some wildly successful online promotions, including one that was fittingly called “Dinner with Barack,” where we would select a group of donors to have a meal with Obama. Other contest winners got to spend time with us on the trail. Barack loved these. He got to meet donors like Michael Wilson of Cocoa Beach, Florida, an Air Force veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom who disagreed with the reasons for our going to war. A registered Republican, Mike believed Barack reflected “what America is and what America needs.” As Obama pondered the finance decision, these were the people he visualized.

On the phone late one night I laid out for him the different campaigns we would have to run in the two scenarios. "I've made up my mind," he said when I finished speaking. "We'll get out of the system. Let's execute it right away. No reason to delay."

The most important component of our decision was sharing it first directly with our supporters. We had done this from time to time, though never on something this significant, and learned that it held real value to our supporters—it made them feel very connected to the campaign. They loved getting information directly from us, rather than seeing it reported elsewhere.

Obama filmed a short video explaining his decision. "It's not an easy decision," he said, "especially because I support a robust system of public financing of elections. But the public financing of presidential elections as it exists today is broken, and we face opponents who've become masters at gaming this broken system."

We sent the video out by e-mail to our entire list on June 19, and that's how the press and John McCain learned of our decision. As predicted, the press hammered us and editorialized against our decision, saying that we had dealt "a body blow both to the system of campaign finance and to [Obama's] own reputation as a reform candidate." McCain, perhaps prizing media opinion over voters', spent days denigrating our choice. But we thought voters had bigger concerns and that he wasted precious time making a process argument when his own hands weren't clean.

Next we had to lock in how we planned to spend the revenue. We had quietly begun planning and budgeting in April and May, so we would be
prepared when the general election began in earnest. Hildebrand, Jen O'Malley, Griselano, Carson, CFO Marianne Markowitz, and Henry Desio, our chief operating officer, and their teams began a very arduous process to lay out our state and national budgets for the final five months.

I gave them a figure of $475 million to work with. Our fund-raising staff was very nervous about these numbers—their projections had us raising under $400 million. But I expected the grassroots funding to explode after the two conventions and throughout debate season, and did not want to budget too conservatively. It was a leap of faith but one I thought was justified given our trajectory. Campaigns often spend money haphazardly at the end because they did not accurately budget for the inevitable surge in contributions as the country's interest waves in the days before the election.

Budgeting is an art, not a science. I wanted us to have an approach of high growth and risk, because I actually believed that $475 million would just be our floor. Some of this was based on incessant calculations I did on my own. Pure gut instinct was a factor as well. This race was so intense and our supporters so passionate that I thought we had to plan as if the additional money would come.

As I expected, the budget team came back with a much larger budget than $475 million. Their first cut was $611 million. This was brazen but laughable, and my response was short: "Right now there is no play in the $475 million," I told them. "This is not a negotiating exercise."

Despite Herculean efforts, their next budget was still over $500 million. To get to $475 million we cut even more paid media, which is usually the sacred cow of campaign budgets. Media gets funded first and fully, and other departments make do with whatever is left.

This time I believed that our state campaigns should be the driving factor. Registering voters, person-to-person persuasion, building strong local organizations, boosting turnout where we needed to, and gathering as big an e-mail list as possible would be more important than advertising to our ultimate success. It is much more effective to throw late-stage surplus funds on TV than to field operations, which need time and infrastructure to grow.

Advertising would be critical, though, and we would do plenty of it. We still needed to educate voters about the basics of Barack's biography and values, as well as his positions; many of the general-election voters did not pay close attention to the primary, and McCain had already spent decades on the public stage; he was a much more known quantity.

Our paid media team was nervous. For all the McCain campaign's bellyaching, our ad spending and theirs were roughly equal through July and August in the states where we both advertised. But I was comfortable with the risk inherent in our de-emphasizing paid-media funding. First, there are some races where advertising is the central driver, but these tend to be Senate and House races, which don't dominate local news coverage or voter attention. Voters follow presidential races carefully. They watch the conventions and debates. Thanks to the explosion of the Internet, following the contest had never been easier. The personalities and stakes of the 2008 race promised to deliver a highly engaged electorate, which alleviated the need, at least early, to have monstrously large media buys. Second, with McCain staying in federal funding limits, we could develop quite a gap in our media spending at the most critical time—the last two months of the campaign—even working within our $475 million budget.

With so many factors in play it often felt like throwing a dart at a moving bull's-eye. We developed a good system to help us stay within budget, assess why we were exceeding it in certain areas, and make strategic adjustments. We never dipped into the red; only once did we have cash-flow issues—as projected, right before the Democratic convention when our spending was ramping up and the dog days of August made for sluggish fund-raising.

While the budget team was initially in Fantasyland, the final budget was far from spartan. It funded every state at muscular levels and represented the most expensive presidential campaign effort in battleground states in history, by several factors. Our Florida budget was $38 million; our Virginia budget, $22 million; and our Colorado budget, $10 million. We built budgets that we thought could produce wins and did not tier the states by importance. We were all-in.

As we transitioned into the general, we needed to make some staff additions and changes. Most pressing was building our senior team in all the battleground states. Many state leaders were drawn from our staff in the primary, but we had ample holes and filling them was harder than we expected. For starters, we had a salary cap, and some folks balked at it because they could make more in other campaigns. That was an easy one for us. No negotiating, no looking back. See you later.

Second, our approach in the states was very different from previous Democratic presidential campaigns. In many elections, state directors handled their local politics, made sure the candidate's trips into the state went well, and
helped spread the campaign's message when the candidate and other principals were not there. Our state staff leadership would have these responsibilities, but we asked much more of them. We valued above all their ability to build a state campaign that worked day in and day out toward our voter-turnout goals, constantly measuring their performance against established metrics, and prioritizing volunteers above party leaders.

Those with experience in the Kerry, Gore, and Clinton campaigns were not necessarily the best fit. Not everyone we talked to grasped this concept or agreed with it. It took some time to fill out the roster, but we ended up with terrific state staff, a healthy balance of Obama primary warriors and new blood.

We sent Paul Tewes, of Iowa fame, to manage the DNC for the last five months, to make sure we were in alignment and getting the most from that committee. Mitch Stewart was running Virginia. Emily Parcell, another Iowa stalwart, took Indiana. Ray Rivera, who led us to a key win in the Colorado primary, now revamped his team for the general election. These Obama veterans were joined by people like Aaron Pickrell, chief of staff to Ohio's governor Ted Strickland, who had worked his heart out for Clinton but now ran the Buckeye state for us. Marc Furinella, a longtime Democratic consultant, went back to his campaign-manager roots and ran North Carolina. Steve Schale, who worked in the Florida statehouse, took a leave to head up our team in the Sunshine State. These folks and their colleagues were some of the strongest state directors in the history of presidential politics.

We also needed to build a staff for our yet-to-be-named vice presidential pick. Our selection for the top job on this team surprised many—we selected our old nemesis, Patti Solis Doyle, who had been Hillary's campaign manager until she was fired after the Maine caucuses. The vice president's campaign chief of staff was a largely organizational figure; key strategic decisions would all come from our core Obama team. We needed a leader who would make sure everything was well managed day to day, someone who could get our VP up to speed quickly on message and electoral strategy, and make sure he (or she, at this point) was briefed properly as breaking news or new attacks surfaced.

After she left Clinton's campaign, Patti came under fierce criticism for how she managed their money, and she was a prominent contestant in the blame game of how they had been outfoxed on electoral strategy. Those may have been valid criticisms. But Patti had been Hillary's scheduler and then her top political person; her skill set matched very well with the position we needed to fill. As a Chicago native, she was also a known quantity to Axelrod and Obama—Ax in particular—and they felt she would be a good fit.

Many Clinton supporters attacked us for hiring Patti, suggesting we were rubbing salt in a wound and insulting Hillary by bringing on the person they blamed for her defeat. One insider reacted to Patti's hire by saying, "Translated subtitles aren't necessary. There is no other way to interpret this other than [Expletive] you." Wow.

This took me by surprise. Suggesting we had the time or inclination to make important hires based on what would annoy Clinton partisans was nuts. We stuck to our guns and tried to explain to those who asked that we would never be illogical or mean-spirited in making any hire, particularly one so important to the campaign's smooth operations. We brought in other Clinton campaign veterans, including senior people like Clinton's policy director and speechwriter and many of her state staff. There was a lot of talent out there and we needed the help. Secondarily, we thought it would expedite the healing and make Clinton's supporters around the country feel more comfortable getting involved.

Fitting all these new people into the framework of our well-oiled campaign offered its own challenges. Our existing senior staff sent a message to the new additions: We had largely been a collegial campaign with a healthy culture, relatively devoid of drama. If that changed, we asked the newbies, where was the first place we'd look to figure out why? The message was not lost. For the most part, the assimilation went well. Having strong continuity in our campaign made this task easier. We were not making wholesale changes—we simply strengthened and expanded our core, which remained fiercely loyal and like a family.

This unity was highly unusual in Democratic presidential campaigns. Most organizations experience upheaval at some point, as the pros from Dover come in to replace some of the candidate's loyal, local inner circle. Barak did not want that. "We rode into town together, we'll ride out together, win or lose," he often said.

Once we squared all this away, I turned my attention to the one remaining senior position that needed to be filled: mine. In early spring I told Barack that once we had sealed the nomination I would step down as campaign manager.
I pledged to stay heavily involved, but I could no longer run the show in Chicago.

I was not abandoning ship. I fundamentally reject the notion that any member of the staff is irreplaceable. Fathers, however, are. I had been largely absent from my young son’s life for over a year. We had a baby due two days before the general election; I wanted to spend some time with my boy before he had to share me with a sister.

My wife had decided to leave Chicago and return to Washington in August, in order to be with family and old friends for the last months of her pregnancy, and to allow our son to settle into his hometown and start preschool with the rest of his class. Unfortunately the home we would be moving into was being renovated, meaning my four-year-old and his extremely pregnant mother would spend two months staying with various friends and family, hoping the house would be ready before the baby came. I knew it would be tough and I couldn’t stomach not being there to help.

Barack was not happy with my decision. He had come to lean on me and we had developed a solid relationship. There was also a comfort factor; with everything else Obama needed to do, he did not want to have to adjust to a new manager to boot. I thought perhaps Jon Corson, who had masterfully managed our state operations in the primary, could step in. I tried to get Arx’s approval on this, and he shrugged his shoulders. “Sure, Carso would be great. But you’re not going to leave as manager. Obama simply won’t allow it.”

Barack told me to hire as many people as I wanted to help ease the load but insisted I stay in place as manager, driving and making big decisions as others handled more execution. “I just want to know you are managing the process,” he said, “and ultimately making the big strategic decisions. And I want to keep the relationship you and I have had, talking through everything every day.”

This didn’t address my central problem, which was a need to be with my family. Our senior staff was terrific—I certainly did not think it wise to make any broad expansions to our existing right unit. I was also exhausted and thought a fresh and singularly focused manager might serve the campaign in its home stretch.

In early 2008, when I first discussed with my wife my stepping down, she had been supportive. Now, as word leaked within the campaign that I might go, several members of the staff expressed to her their personal alarm at the disruption it would cause. As the primary stretched into June, they pointed out, when the countdown to the VP selection, convention, debates, and Election Day had already begun, there was no time to spare for a leadership transition.

Still, I was not prepared for what my wife told me late one night at the end of the spring. “I think you have to stay,” she said. “There will inevitably be a hiccup or two transitioning to a new manager. It’s almost summer already; the campaign doesn’t have time for growing pains. You just bought like crazy to make Barack the Democratic nominee; we have an obligation to do everything we can to elect him in November. I have no idea how we will manage. But we will.”

I was moved but still not convinced. This was not just about what I thought would be best for them. It was about being true to myself. And if I stayed as manager, it would mean that I was choosing not to be the father or husband I aspired to be. This was the kind of choice I had always sworn would be easy. Family first.

It’s what wives want their husbands to do, defying history, odds, and tradition. But there would be no surprise announcement of chivalry and commitment. My wife’s rationale that it was simply too late to make a change carried the day. I stayed in Chicago.

Having allowed myself something of a fresh start, I took stock of things in my office and found I had a hole organizationally. I needed someone to handle a lot of the day-to-day budget matters, interpersonal and human resource issues, thorny political problems, and some key projects: basically, a campaign chief of staff. I wanted more time to spend on large-scale resource-allocation issues and to chew over the states and our Electoral College paths. On top of that I wanted to be able to spend more time with our advertising team and to start focusing on the debates.

I needed someone with a strong management and campaign background and who would make a good fit into the No Drama Obama culture. Barack’s Senate chief of staff, Pete Rouse, suggested I bring in Jim Messina, who was himself chief of staff for Montana senator Max Baucus and a veteran of many successful campaigns. Messina divved right in. He endeared himself to me from the get-go by taking not two weeks to wrap up his affair but shove across the country in two days and get started. He was a terrific addition, quickly earning people’s trust and confidence despite being new to our core senior group. I made clear from Day One that he spoke for me, and we made sure there was no daylight between us, which helped. As the weeks passed, I wondered how the hell I had survived the primary without someone like Jim.
One night in June, Axelrod and I were sitting in my office at HQ. Piles of paper were everywhere, and the walls were covered with maps that had not worn well since being tacked up over a year earlier. It was late, and we were taking a moment to catch our breath. "You know," I said to him, "we have four big things in the next five months we have to excel at. If we can nail those, knowing we should be able to win the message war, especially the economy, have more money and a better organization and electoral strategy than McCain, we should win."

Ax immediately rattled them off: "Trip. VP. Convention. Debates."

Translated out of campaign shorthand, this meant a foreign trip we'd decided to embark on in July, the selection and announcement of a vice presidential nominee, the Democratic convention, and the four debates, three between the presidential candidates and one VP debate.

"A gauntlet for sure," I replied. "But if we can beat Hillary, we can handle these."

Ax shot me a look. "A foreign trip where one thing goes wrong and we could implode," he ticked off, "a VP process that is months late and draws from a thin field, a convention that we haven't even gotten our arms around—and don't forget the Clinton drama that could dominate Denver—and debates, not exactly our strong suit, whatever improvement we've made. Thanks, Plouffe, for seeing the bright side."

For all his characteristic gloom, he was right. It is often said presidential campaigns are not won in August but they can be lost there. We would soon find out.
Epilogue

For me, the afterglow of winning a presidential campaign was fleeting. At about 1:00 a.m. in the same hotel where three hours earlier Obama and his family first learned he would be the forty-fourth president of the United States, Anita Dunn, David Axelrod, Robert Gibbs, and I sat down with a camera crew from 60 Minutes. The interview was to focus on how we put together the campaign that yielded such an improbable victory, and it would run the next Sunday.

We were all exhausted. The campaign was finally over, but rather than cutting loose at last, we were going to be conducting an interview that would be seen by tens of millions of viewers around the world who would be watching to gain insight into Barack Obama, no longer our candidate, but America's new president-elect.

Given those stakes, it was perhaps ill advised for us to engage in some modest revelry. But after the two-year war we had just endured, putting off a valedictory brew any longer was simply not acceptable. Gibbs was losing his voice and fighting off a cold, and he and Anita smartly demurred. But Ax said he would join me for a nip. So we took our coffee cups, filled them with a little beer, and kept them in front of us during the interview. It could not have tasted better, and we seemed to handle Steve Kroft's probing questions just fine.

After the interview wrapped up, we left the hotel and lingered outside. Of course this would not be good-bye forever, but it was the end of the unique experience we had just shared. And as brutal and unrelenting as the campaign had been, it was a pleasure to have gone through it with these three colleagues and the rest of our team. We had truly become a family.

We already knew that Ax and Gibbs would be going into the administration. Anita and I would not be (though Anita did relent and agreed by the summer of 2009 to serve as White House communications director). This split
would filter down through the rest of the staff. Some members would move forward with Obama on his journey, working night and day to fulfill the promise of his presidency. The rest of us would be helping in smaller and less time-consuming ways.

We exchanged embraces and my last hug was with Ax. We didn’t say much and didn’t have to. He simply said, “The pleasure of a lifetime, brother.”

“Wouldn’t have wanted to walk the road with anyone else,” I responded.

And with that, the Obama for President campaign came to a close.

My flight out of O’Hare the next morning was scheduled for 6:00 a.m., so I just stayed up and watched the coverage of our victory. The history nerd in me had a lot to appreciate about the particulars of the results, notably the victory we appeared to be headed toward in good ol’ Nebraska 2, which marked the first time the state’s electoral votes had ever been divided. I left for the airport at 4:30 and arrived at the security screening area in a fatigue-induced daze, carrying two pieces of luggage and my computer bag. The security officer told me I had one bag too many and would have to go back and check it. If I did that, I could miss the flight. So I asked if I could lose a bag in the trash can. The guard looked at me quizzically and said, “Your call.”

It was no decision at all. My wife was now three days overdue, the baby could come any moment, and I had promised my son I would be there on Wednesday to take him to school—for the first time in two years. I could not miss that plane. So I got on my knees, ripped open one bag, pulled my computer out and threw it in a suitcase, and started frantically rooting through the rest of my things. Finally I tossed one bag, much of its remaining contents, and a few clothes to boot in the nearby garbage. Now everything would fit in two bags.

Just then someone in line behind me said haltingly, “David Plouffe?”

I looked up to find a man I didn’t know with a concerned expression on his face. “Yes?” I asked, perhaps a bit impatiently.

“Are you okay?” he replied. “We won, you know.”

I laughed. I must have looked like a madman, sleep deprived and unshaven, tossing my possessions into a garbage can. It was a long way from the dignified pinnacle of a few hours before. And somehow it felt terrific. I stood up, picked up my two bags, and smiled. “Never been better.”

I made the flight and two days later, in the early morning about fifty hours after the announcement of our victory, our daughter made her debut. May she always have such exquisite timing!

There was no question of my joining the administration. After the past two years and with a new baby to take care of, being a ghost father and husband was not an option. I had first discussed this with Obama in the spring, when I flirted with leaving as campaign manager after the epic march of the primaries. When I agreed to stay I told him flippantly, “If we win, I have to be gone November 5. We have a baby coming and I have to dig in with my family.”

And I did just that. While many of my colleagues from the campaign were working around the clock on the transition and inauguration and agreeing to administration jobs, I had ample time, albeit it usually at 4:00 a.m. with a baby sleeping on my chest, to reflect on some of the lessons of the campaign, and what they might mean moving forward.

We were essentially a start-up business. We had had nothing when we began—no lists, no equipment, no talent pool just waiting for the green light. Our candidate had had little experience on the national stage and almost no relationships or experience in the states that would decide our fate. It was an enormous challenge to launch this effort, under intense scrutiny, while we were still trying to get the phones turned on and the computers up and running. But that formative period created our identity, and many of the principles and decisions we employed at the outset were instrumental in allowing us to win. I presume these ideas would have some value to any enterprise.

We entered the campaign, and exited it, in the right mind-set, with a unique mixture of idealism and pragmatism. We believed that Obama offered great promise as both a candidate and a potential president, the kind of promise that most of us had assumed we would never witness, much less be a part of. This optimism was married to a keen appreciation of just how narrow our pathway to success would be. The odds from the start said we would not win. So idealism kept us going, but pragmatism kept us grounded. Both were necessary to our success.

We began with the belief that we needed a clear message as well as a single strategy. The message would encapsulate the emotion and substance we were offering voters, and the strategy would outline our theory for how we would succeed. Both of these were established at the outset and inviolable. There was no guarantee our strategy would work, but we needed to commit to one path, not many, and base every decision on it. And on both message and strategy, we did not pay much attention to what those on the outside were saying, whether we were perceived at that moment as up or down. We had our own
radar and metrics and did not change course or rethink our fundamentals when the chorus of critics demanded it.

Everything in the campaign flowed through the prism of strategy, which made decision making relatively uneventful, a must for any organization. Taking the suspense out of why you say yes or no improves productivity, understanding, and morale, and makes it easier to reach sound decisions for the right reasons. This methodology also allowed us to make decisions quickly. In the beginning we had no choice, but as we got established, we carried that approach forward. There was simply no time to dither and second-guess. We knew that we wouldn't get all the calls right, and of course we didn't. But when we were wrong, we avoided wallowing or extended recriminations.

Technology played a key role in our success. Reaching an audience involves more than just figuring out who your audience is; it also means knowing how to find them. Part of the reason our campaign was so successful is that we were able to identify early that many of the people we wanted to reach were spending more of their time on the Internet. We realized that a smart, and large, Internet presence was the best way to provide people with the opportunity and the tools to get involved in the campaign—they were already immersed in the world of technology and would be more likely to encounter us there. We met people where they lived, instead of forcing them to deviate from their habits or lifestyle to seek us out. Our early commitment to a digitally based platform paid huge dividends.

From the outset, we tried to figure out how to communicate with target voters with a fresh set of eyes. Established tactics, like press interviews, TV ads, and mail pieces, would of course be important parts of our arsenal. But we put a huge premium on direct digital communication, as well as on the power of human beings’ talking to human beings, online, on the phone, and at the door.

The principle underlying this was fairly simple: we live in a busy and fractured world in which people are bombarded with pleas for their attention. Given this, you have to try extra hard to reach them. You need to be everywhere. And for people you reach multiple times through different mediums, you need to make sure your message is consistent, so, for instance, they don't see a TV ad on tax cuts, hear a radio ad on health care, and click on an Internet ad about energy all on the same day. Messaging needs to be aligned at every level: between offline and online, principal and volunteer, phone and e-mail.

We tried to be on our target voters’ network TV, cable, satellite, and on-demand; on their radios; all over the Internet; in their mailboxes; on their landlines and their cell phones, if we could; at their doorsteps; and out in their communities. Balanced communications across all mediums is critical in any messaging effort today.

We measured our progress exclusively with our own yardstick. That takes discipline, but discipline without attention to the right metrics is meaningless. Whether it came to fund-raising, voter registration, our local press footprint, filling volunteer slots, or ultimately reaching our vote goals, we had clear internal benchmarks that the campaign leadership used to measure our progress or lack thereof, and that all of our staff and volunteers could use to measure their own work. This is of chief importance—organizations tend to thrive when analysis of job performance is based on clear and incontrovertible standards. This way, any corrective action is based not on subjective measures but on clear, well-defined, objective ones.

Judging performance based on clear internal metrics leads to a healthy work environment, but it is just one part of a thoughtful and productive organizational culture. The culture established in the infancy of the Obama campaign carried us through for two years and had many other important facets. We placed a real premium on discretion and did not leak our internal discussions and business to the press or political community; we all felt that the mission was bigger than any of us individually; we tried to install calmness, consistency, and clear rules of the road for employees, strong managers were hired and given great autonomy to reach strategic goals; and we were led by a candidate who each and every day quietly reinforced these principles, making any violation of them seem a betrayal of the cause.

We were a healthy organization,warts and all. There have been plenty of organizations that thrive, for a time at least, under leaders who yell and scream and fly off the handle and are propelled forward by a culture of intimidation and even fear. But I believe that, ultimately, organizations are collections of human beings. They will perform best and make their greatest achievements when there is clarity, calmness, conviction, and collegiality throughout the ranks.

Culture is about people. And the people of our campaign made this victory a reality. There is no more effective courier for a message than people who believe in it and have authentically embraced it. Our secret weapon, day in and day out, was our army of volunteers, real people who brought Obama's message and ideas to their neighbors, co-workers, and fellow citizens, guided
by our extraordinary staff. The bonds of trust between individuals who shared values, goals, or even just living space were far stronger than anything we might hope to have forged through more traditional tactics. In many ways, the delivery of our message and the execution of our electoral strategy were successfully carried on the backs of these bonds.

And because these bonds are ultimately very fragile sinews, the trust contained within them cannot be abused. It took something special and true for people to put in the effort, day after day, at great personal and financial sacrifice. Yes, they believed in Obama's policy agenda and leadership abilities, and they thought the country needed to go in a fundamentally different direction. But all those factors led to votes, not historic levels of activism. The bond between the candidate and his supporters was intense and based on authenticity. Time strengthened it. Supporters knew in their hearts and in their guts that he respected and believed in the role of involved and leadership in their local communities, and in the campaign. It was not his campaign—it was their campaign. That kind of loyalty and inspiration cannot be manufactured. Without it, we would have had a great website and all networking sites, flashy but lacking humanity. Barack Obama and his supporters created something powerful and real, the likes of which we may not see for a very long time (with the exception of 2012, I hope).

I left the campaign extraordinarily confident about the future of the country, because of the talent and drive of the young men and women who made our victory possible. Certainly, we would not have won the primary or the general without a surging youth turnout in any number of states, Iowa most importantly. But their impact on the election goes beyond casting ballots. Most of our staff was under thirty, many of them under twenty-five, as were a sizable chunk of our most active volunteers. As I witnessed, sometimes in awe, their performance and desire to look beyond themselves and contribute to a better world (and they have a distinctly global outlook) it gave me extreme comfort to know that in the not so distant future they will be taking the reins and leading our companies, campaigns, and institutions. For my generation, the rocking chairbeckons—these kids are that good. I can't wait to experience their leadership and vision in the years to come.

We started our campaign with the firm but risky belief that we could radically expand the electorate and that we could count on our grassroots supporters to execute our plan. This strategy proved wildly successful. Yes, we won states like Indiana, North Carolina, and Virginia because of that expansion. But you have to go a bit deeper into the numbers to understand just how effective that strategy was. If you consider only the people who voted in the Bush-Kerry election four years earlier, according to national exit polls, Obama beat McCain by a very small margin, 50–49 percent. In the 2004 election, Bush beat Kerry 51–47 percent among those same voters. A five-point swing is a big deal in itself, and it underlines Obama's appeal to traditional independent and even Republican voters.

But leaving it in the hands of only those voters would have produced another nail-biter election, which potentially could have been lost to a more strategic opponent. The reason we won comfortably, with the highest vote percentage for a Democrat since 1988, was that among people voting for the first time in a presidential election—or for the first time in a long time—we won by a shocking 71–27 percent. Younger voters turned out in huge numbers. African American voters turned out at roughly the same rate as white voters for the first time in the country's history. The share of the electorate over sixty-five actually dropped between 2004 and 2008, not because fewer older voters turned out but because younger ones showed up in droves.

We—most importantly the candidate himself—refused to accept the electorate as it was. We thought we could make it younger and more diverse, and that's exactly what we did. That beautiful map of the 2008 vote, with Obama blue in some very unusual places, like Indiana and North Carolina, is a testament to our belief that we could reach the Holy Grail of politics. We tried to shoot high but remained grounded in a hard analysis of what would truly be possible.

President Obama is that way. He's not terribly interested in the same old arguments and debates or conventional reasons why things can't be done. He pushes and challenges, but he also doesn't want to tilt at windmills. Wiping the slate clean, looking at things differently—as we did in both the primary and the general—and deciding on a course based on sound analysis and research is an Obama hallmark, one that I believe will serve the country well.

Of course, when you do this, the cynics and purveyors of conventional wisdom howl in protest. In Washington, many focus more on what can't be done than on what can be. One of the president's great strengths, and therefore his organization's strength, is his discipline: once a course has been set, he is determined not to let a chorus of critics alter that game plan. I saw this commitment over and over again in the campaign when it came to message and
strategy, and I can see it coming into play now as the White House tackles the hard work of stabilizing the economy, passing health insurance reform, and creating an energy revolution in America.

His efforts will be graded daily by the pundits, and polls will be thrown around as evidence of progress or setbacks, but he will keep the ship steady, focused on achieving an end result that will improve the lives of Americans. Without this discipline and long-range focus, change would be impossible to bring about in Washington, a city where every bump, real or imagined, is treated as a permanent setback. The president does not view his work and progress on these imperatives through the lens of daily political scorekeeping. He stays focused on whether his day-to-day work, most of which will never appear in the news, is leading toward the desired result.

As I write this, Washington is in a state of high agitation about health care. Some suggest that reform efforts are in deep trouble and question whether President Obama has bitten off too much, is too conciliatory, or is not conciliatory enough. It is a familiar dynamic from the campaign, akin to those moments when the press puts us in the penalty box.

But this is where the president’s long-term outlook and inner calm will serve the cause of health insurance reform and, therefore, the country. He is a chess player in a town full of checkers players. His eyes will remain focused only on the goal, and he will measure progress and make adjustments based on that, not on the current amount of hyperventilation going on in the political press.

It concerns me—and this is strictly a personal observation—that some quarters of the Democratic Party seem to worry that the effort will take too long, that health care reform, and then energy reform, could do damage to the party, because some recent polls have shown a not insignificant amount of unease among voters. In my view, this is looking three yards downhill instead of thirty. In the long run, the economy will be healed, and growing; landmark health insurance reform that has languished in Washington for seventy years will have been passed; and we will have done the hard work required to make us the worldwide leader in new energy and green jobs for generations to come. But to make that happen, we need to lay the groundwork now.

I hope Republicans will assist in these efforts. Only a few helped to push through the stimulus package, which I believe will come to be seen as an important cornerstone in our economic recovery. When the smoke clears, the Democrats will have a remarkable record of leadership that moved the country forward and will consequently have great political appeal. Contrast that with the Washington Republicans, who likely have played little role, with the exception of a few principled individuals. And let’s not forget that the economic policies they still embrace played a large role in creating this crisis.

When their feckless on health care proves to be just that—when reform passes and voters still have their choice of doctors, care remains rationed, and Sarah Palin’s death panels have killed only her political prospects—the Republicans in Washington will truly be exposed as the emperors with no clothes. They will have zero credibility. They are putting all their rotten eggs into one basket, using misinformation and outright lies to try to deny the president a victory.

This is the wrong approach for our country and a clear example of the Washington mentality that has prevented us from solving big challenges. But I believe it is also bad politics and at some point in the future will be seen as political malpractice. If the Republicans have little contribution to show when it comes to digging the country out of our greatest economic threat since the Great Depression or solving big issues like health care and energy, it could be a long, long road back to viability. They are already in bad shape with younger and Latino voters and will face only further damage when their overheated criticism on health care is proved to be demonstrably false.

I sincerely hope more in the Washington GOP decide to meet the moment by setting aside their misinformation campaigns and by working with the president and Democrats in Congress to find solutions that will benefit all Americans. But if they insist on treading their current path—a high-risk strategy of opposing everything and proposing nothing—they will pay an electoral price that, from my perspective, they will richly deserve.

Our belief in people did not end on November 4. As the president-elect said in his victory speech that night, “This victory alone is not the change we seek—it is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It cannot happen without you. So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other.”

When I talked to him on the phone the morning my daughter was born,
he made clear his belief in the power of people not just to win an election but to change a country. "I know you're disappearing for a while to change diapers and play Mr. Dad," he said to me, "but just make sure you find time to help figure out how to keep our supporters involved. I don't think we can succeed without them." As I listened to him, I could hear Candidate Obama morph smoothly into President Obama. "We need to make sure they're pushing from the grass roots on Washington and helping to spread what we're trying to do in their local communities. And at the very least, we have to give them the opportunity to stay involved and in touch. They gave their heart and soul to us. This shouldn't feel like a transactional relationship, because that's not what it was. I want them along for the ride the next eight years, helping us deliver on all we talked about in the campaign."

His desire for a continued dialogue with the more than thirteen million people who signed up for the campaign led to the formation of a new group called Organizing for America (OFA). Run by Mitch Stewart and housed in the DNC, OFA ensures that the president can stay in touch with his millions of volunteers and supporters, communicating directly through the Internet and encouraging them to rally support and educate people in their local communities on what he is trying to accomplish on the economy, health care, energy, and other issues.

People talking to people, block by block, town by town, was an idea that Barack Obama believed strongly as a candidate and still does as the president. The power of this interpersonal dialogue was never properly appreciated by our opponents or by the press and political community. But those quiet conversations, which took place in every corner of America, helped us win the election and will help the president succeed with his goals. In the end, they are far more important than the bickering politicians and pundits in the news media who get such outsize attention in our culture today. Of course this effort will not rival the campaign in size, intensity, or scope. But having millions of Americans absorbing ideas and message, understanding them, and sharing them—and having thousands on any given day organize conversations in their communities to show and build support for them—is an asset few presidents, if any, have enjoyed. This will be another piece of bringing about change to a city, Washington, that seems to abhor it.

President Obama’s relative success or failure will be judged largely by the result of his legislative initiatives. And these are of course critical, especially when it comes to issues like health care, energy, and financial and regulatory reform. But he also believes strongly in the ability of real leadership to make a huge difference.

We saw voters looking at the human qualities of leadership throughout the campaign. His call for a new politics based on more civil and respectful dialogue, his risky and forthright speech on race during the Jeremiah Wright episode, and his challenge to parents “to turn the TV off and read to your kids” and to take more responsibility and involvement in their children’s education—all these drove support for his candidacy.

The impact of his leadership qualities will likely not receive much attention in the daily box score of our political coverage, but I believe it could have a lasting impact. A generation from now, I suspect there will be a much smaller percentage of young people across the globe who choose the route of terrorism than might have, because President Obama will change the way many look at our country in the coming years. Studies may show a higher percentage of parents actively engaged in their children’s education because of the president’s leadership and the emphasis both he and the first lady are putting on parental involvement and responsibility in learning.

And even though there will be tough fights in Washington, the president will resist the low road. This attitude goes directly against the old dusty Washington playbook and may not be rewarded by the pundits. Outrage, anger, and attacks always get boffo coverage, reasonableness, measured responses, and seeing both sides of issues rarely do. But this is what the country is hungry for and what’s called for if we hope to repair the tremendous damage done to our government and to our communities after so many years of a highly partisan approach to government. During the campaign, Candidate Obama treated the voters like adults, discussing issues and solutions in detail and, yes, with nuance, though he was often derided for doing so by many political observers. They said he was too professorial and did not engage in enough snappy, short lines of rhetoric. They are still criticizing him. But the president believes deeply that the American people want to have an honest and complex dialogue about the direction of the country.

And over time, I believe the American people, and maybe even a few politicians in Washington, will appreciate this change in tone; and perhaps years from now it will eventually become the norm instead of the exception.

Our election victory did not fully settle in for me until January 17, 2009, three days before the inauguration. I would still find myself hearing and seeing the words “President Obama,” “incoming White House Press Secretary Robert...
Gibbs," or "White House Senior Adviser David Axelrod," and I'd do a double
take. It just didn't seem real.

And I was not alone. When I talked to the president-elect at some point in
December, during the conversation where he encouraged me to write this
book, he said, "Each day, it sinks in a little bit more. But there are still moments
when it seems like an out-of-body experience. Then the reality that these will
soon be my problems, that they're no longer theoretical, snaps me back. Not
that we won. But that we have to govern. I actually haven't had a moment to
really savor what we accomplished in the campaign. The election was over
and the very next moment, we had a government to build, priorities to set
with the problems getting worse by the hour."

The Saturday before the inaugural, my wife, son, and I joined the Obama
and Biden families in a box on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for an inau-
gural weekend concert that featured a dizzying array of talent, including Bruce
Springsteen, U2, Stevie Wonder, and Beyoncé. It was a very nice gesture on
their part to include us, though it has ruined all future concerts for my son;
they will all pale in comparison. The president-elect was slated to speak briefly
during the show and a few moments before he would stride to the microphone,
I looked at him from behind. Everyone in our box was, and I assume the
hundreds of thousands in the crowd were, fixed on the music performance
onstage. But the president-elect was intently gazing in the direction of Abra-
ham Lincoln's imposing statue rising up behind and above the stage. And ever
the staff guy, I was observing him do so.

For me, this was the moment that his election finally became real. Watching
our first African American president look quietly at Lincoln, the great eman-
cipator, before taking the steps of the memorial built in his honor simply took
my breath away.

Later that night, the Obamas had invited a small number of campaign
staffers and key supporters to join them at Blair House, a government build-
ing where many foreign dignitaries stay when visiting Washington. It is directly
across from the White House and the Obama family was staying there that
weekend before they moved into their new home.

I asked the president-elect when I saw him, "Before you spoke today, were
you looking up at Lincoln?"

He raised his eyelids, surprised perhaps that his private moment had been
witnessed. "Very observant, Plouffe," he said. "It was emotional to be speaking
on the Lincoln Memorial, given all the history involved. Reading the inscrip-
tion reminded me of the weight of this office through history. It helped me
gather myself. For all of our challenges, we've faced greater. Lincoln had to
save the Union."

He paused. "So I also asked Abe for wisdom and judgment and patience.
We'll need it."

"Well, for me, it finally made all this real," I said. "Seeing you on those steps,
drawing on Lincoln for inspiration, it was a remarkable moment in history."

He grabbed my shoulder and looked into my eyes. "It's real now for me,
too. And, humbly, I think I'm ready. I can't wait to get to work and help change
this country for the better."

I know he will.