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PROLOGUE

THE DEBATE WAS ONLY a few minutes old, and Barack Obama was al-
ready tanking. His opponent on this warm autumn night, a Massachu-
setts patrician with an impressive résumé, a chiseled jaw, and a staunch
helmet of burnished hair, was an inferior political specimen by any conceiv-
able measure. But with surprising fluency, verve, and even humor, Obama’s
rival was putting points on the board. The president was not. Passive and
passionless, he seemed barely present.

It was Sunday, October 14, 2012, and Obama was bunkered two levels
below the lobby of the Kingsmill Resort, in Williamsburg, Virginia. In a blue
blazer, khaki pants, and an open-necked shirt, he was squaring off in a mock
debate against Massachusetts senator John Kerry, who was standing in for
the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney. The two men were in Williamsburg,
along with the president’s team, to prepare Obama for his second televised
confrontation with Romney, forty-eight hours away, at Hofstra University,
in Hempstead, New York. It was an event to which few had given much
thought. Until the debacle in Denver, that is.

The debate in the Mile High City eleven days earlier jolted a race that for
many months had been hard-fought but remarkably stable. From the mo-
ment in May that Romney emerged victorious from the most volatile and
unpredictable Republican nomination contest in many moons, Obama held a narrow yet consistent lead. But after Romney mauled the president in Denver, the wind and weather of the campaign shifted dramatically in something like a heartbeat. The challenger was surging. The polls were tightening. Republicans were pulsating with renewed hope. Democrats were rending their garments and collapsing on their fainting couches.

Obama was nowhere in the vicinity of panic. "You ever known me to lose two in a row?" he said to friends to calm their nerves.

The president’s advisers were barely more rattled. Yes, Denver had been atrocious. Yes, it had been unnerving. But Obama was still ahead of Romney, the sky hadn’t fallen, and they would fix what went wrong in time for the town hall debate at Hofstra. Their message to the nervous nellies in their party was: Keep calm and carry on.

Williamsburg was where the repair job was supposed to take place. The Obamians had arrived at the resort, ready to work, on Saturday the 13th. The first day had gone well. The president seemed to be finding his form. He and Kerry had been doing mock debates since August, and the session on Saturday night was Obama’s best yet. Everyone exhaled.

But now, in Sunday night’s run-through, the president seemed to be re-lapsing; the disengaged and pedantic Obama of Denver was back. In the staff room, his two closest advisers, David Axelrod and David Plouffe, watched on video monitors with a mounting sense of unease—when, all of a sudden, a practice round that had started out looking merely desultory turned into the Mock from Hell.

The moment it happened could be pinpointed with precision: at the 39:35 mark on the clock. A question about home foreclosures had been put to POTUS; under the rules, he had two minutes to respond. Before the mock, Kerry had been instructed by one of the debate coaches to interrupt Obama at some juncture to see how he reacted. Striding across the bright red carpet of the set that the president’s team had constructed as a precise replica of the Hofstra town hall stage, Kerry invaded the president’s space and barged in during Obama’s answer.

The president’s eyes flashed with annoyance.

“Don’t interrupt me,” he snapped.

When Kerry persisted, Obama shot a death stare at the moderator—his adviser Anita Dunn, standing in for CNN’s Candy Crowley—and pleaded for an intercession.

The president’s coaches had persistently worried about the appearance of Nasty Obama on the debate stage: the variant who famously, imperiously dismissed his main Democratic rival in 2008 with the withering phrase “You’re likable enough, Hillary.” His advisers saw glimpses of that side of him in their preparations for Denver—a manifestation of a personal antipathy for Romney that had grown visceral and intense. Now they were seeing it again, and worse. The admixture of Nasty Obama and Denver Obama was not a pretty picture.

Challenged by Kerry with multi-pronged attacks, the president rebutted them point by point, exhaustively and exhaustingly. Instead of driving a sharp message, he was explanatory and meandering. Instead of casting an eye to the future, he litigated the past. Instead of warmingly establishing connections with the town hall questioners, he pontificated airily, as if he were conducting a particularly tedious press conference. While Kerry was answering a query about immigration, Obama retaliated for the earlier interruption by abruptly cutting him off.

In the staff room, Axelrod and Plouffe were aghast. Sitting with them, Obama’s lead pollster, Joel Benenson muttered, "This is unbelievable.”

Watching from the set, the renowned Democratic style coach Michael Sheehan scribbled furiously on a legal pad, each notation more alarmed than the last. Reflecting on Obama’s interplay with the questioners, Sheehan summed up his demeanor with a single word: “Creepy.”

After ninety excruciating minutes, the Mock from Hell was over. As Obama made his way for the door, he was intercepted by Axelrod, Plouffe, Benenson, and the lead debate coach, Ron Klain. Little was said. Little needed to be said. The ashén looks on the faces of the president’s men told the tale.

Obama left the building and returned to his sprawling quarters on the banks of the James River with his best friend from Chicago, Marty Nesbitt, to watch football and play cards. His advisers retreated to the president's debate-prep holding room to have a collective coronary.

That the presidential debates were proving problematic for Obama came as no real surprise to the members of his team. Many of them—Axelrod, the
mustached message maven and guardian of the Obama brand; Plouffe, the spindly senior White House adviser and enforcer of strategic rigor; Dunn, the media-savvy mother superior and former White House communications director; Benenson, the bearded and mousy former Mario Cuomo hand; Jon Favreau, the dashing young speechwriter—had been with Obama from the start of his meteoric ascent. They knew that he detested televised debates. That he disdained political theater in every guise. That, on some level, he distrusted political performance itself, with its attendant emotional manipulations.

The paradox, of course, was that Obama had risen to prominence and power to a large extent on the basis of his preternatural performance skills—and his ability to summon them whenever the game was on the line. In late 2007, when he was trailing Hillary Clinton in the Democratic nomination fight by thirty points. In the fall of 2008, when the global financial crisis hit during the crucial last weeks of the general election. In early 2010, when his signature health care reform proposal seemed destined for defeat. In every instance, under duress pressure, Obama had pulled up, and drained a three-pointer at the buzzer.

The faith of the president’s people that he would do the same at Hofstra was what sustained them in the wake of Denver. For a year, the Obamas had fretted over everything under the sun: gas prices; unemployment; the European financial crisis; Iran; the Koch brothers; the lack of enthusiasm from the Democratic base; Hispanic turnout in the Orlando metropolitan area. One thing they had never worried about was Barack Obama.

But given the spectacle they had just witnessed at Kingsmill, the Obamas were more worried. After spending ten days pooh-poohing the widespread hysteria in their party about Denver, Obama’s debate team was now the most wigged-out collection of Democrats in the country, huddling in a hotel cubby that had become their secret panic room. Three hours had passed since the mock ended; it was almost 7:10 p.m. Obama’s team was still clustered in the work space, reading transcripts and waxing apocalyptic.

“Guys, what are we going to do?” Plouffe asked quietly, over and over.

“That was a disaster.”

Among the Obamas, there was nobody more unfappable than Plouffe—and nobody less shaken by Denver. The campaign’s research showed that there was a deep well of sympathy for Obama among voters; in focus groups after the first debate, people offered excuse after excuse for his horrific performance. In Florida, one woman said, almost protectively, “I just bet you he wasn’t feeling well.”

But what the research also told Plouffe was that Obama was “on probation” after Denver. The public might brush off a single bad debate showing: two in a row would not be so readily ignored. With Hofstra less than forty-eight hours away, the Obamas essentially had a day to diagnose the malady afflicting their boss—the sudden sickness that had robbed their great communicator of his ability to communicate under pressure—and find a remedy. What was wrong? What would they do? No one had a clue.

All Plouffe knew was that, if Obama turned in a performance at Hofstra like the one they had seen that night, the consequences could be dire.

“If we don’t fix this,” Plouffe said emphatically, “we could lose the whole fucking election.”

The most hellish days of 2012 for Obama were heaven on earth for Mitt Romney. Before his turn on the debate stage in Denver, Romney had never achieved a moment in the campaign that was politically triumphant and, to his mind, revealing of who he was. His performance as a candidate was unartful, and in exactly the ways that both the Obamas and the GOP establishment had predicted at the start of the race. His greatest credential for the Oval Office—his enormous success in the private sector—was savagely turned against him. His public image from his first national run, in 2008, had been that of a flip-flopping Mormon; in 2012, he was rendered a hybrid of Gordon Gekko and Mr. Magoo. But at that first debate, the Romney in whom his advisers, friends, family, and supporters believed made a powerful appearance: a good and decent man with a formidable intellect, economic expertise, problem-solving know-how, and patriotic zeal. In an instant, the former Massachusetts governor looked like a plausible president. It was a conquest that propelled Romney toward the finish line with new fervor, and one he would savor long after the votes were counted.

With the benefit of hindsight, innumerable analysts would declare that the result of the election was foreordained: that Obama always had it in the
bag. But the president and his people spent all of 2011 and most of 2012 believing nothing of the sort. The economic headwinds that Obama faced were ferocious and unrelenting. His approval ratings during his first term rarely edged above 50 percent. The opposition inspired by his presidency was intense and at times rabid, from the populist ire of the Tea Party to the legislative recalcitrance of the congressional wing of the GOP to the wailing and gnashing of the anti-Obama caucus in the business world and on Wall Street especially. The country was split almost cleanly down the middle, and more polarized than ever.

The two sides had few beliefs in common, but one of them was this: the outcome of the election mattered, and not a little. The ideological contrast between the parties had rarely been starker. In terms of specific policies, the size and role of government and the fundamental priorities of the nation, the practical implications of which man won were vast.

With so much at stake, the 2012 election had the feel of a big casino, as the players took on the complexion of compulsive gamblers, pushing more and more chips into the center of the table. On the right, a phalanx of millionaires and billionaires doubled down on Romney even after his flaws were all too clear, pouring gargantuan sums into his campaign and conservative super PACs. The Republican nominee, in turn, not only doubled down on the orthodoxies of the right but on his own controversial statements and positions. On the left, the Obamans were engaged in their own doubling down: on the coalition that had elected their man in 2008; on their pioneering use of new technology; on their grassroots get-out-the-vote machine. But no doubt the biggest wager they placed was on Obama.

On that mid-October night in Williamsburg, with the election three weeks away, it remained unclear who would leave the casino flush and who would exit with picked-clean pockets. In the end, the answer would lie in the hands of the president of the United States—who, at that hour, far from the cameras, was more imperiled than anyone imagined, his greatest gift having deserted him at the worst possible time. After four years of economic hardship, nagging uncertainty, and disappointment that change had come so slowly when it came at all, Obama would have to rise to a different kind of challenge—a challenge from within himself—before the country would double down on him.
The $35 million estate of Jeffrey Katzenberg sat on Loma Vista Drive at the top of Beverly Hills, occupying six acres, with a majestic view of the City of Angels sprawled out below. Obama and Clinton arrived there that Sunday afternoon, October 7, for lunch with Katzenberg and a handful of the rich and famous. Though the White House publicly described the event only as a "thank you" for a "small group of donors," it was, in fact, a Priorities USA function—the sort of shindig that Obama had sworn never to attend.

For Katzenberg, having two presidents in his concert-hall-size living room was a fitting reward; no Democratic buck-raker had raised more dough in 2012. Katzenberg pitched the lunch to invitees as a once-in-a-lifetime experience—what he called "unobtainium." He recommended that they donate $1 million to Priorities, and bagged three checks in that amount just the Friday before. He pledged to keep his guests' presence secret. (To ferry them to a public campaign fund-raiser afterwards, there would be a private shuttle with tinted windows.) In the end, nine tycoons from the worlds of Hollywood and high tech turned up: Reid Hoffman, Irwin and Joan Jacobs, Vinod Khosla, Seth MacFarlane, Sean Parker, Mark Pincus, Eric Schmidt, and Steven Spielberg.
Obama wasted no time in addressing the debacle in Denver—cutting off Katzenberg before he had a chance to offer opening remarks. "I had too many voices in my head," Obama began. The advice I got from my team was good, but in the moment I couldn't sort it all out. I know what I need to do now. It won't happen again.

Clinton, too, offered reassurance to the kingpins arrayed on Katzenberg's couches. I don't think the president did so bad, and I'm sure he'll be better the next time out, Clinton said. Each one of these debates is its own deal. And, listen, no one's ever won the second debate by winning the first debate.

Until Denver, Clinton had watched in wonder as Obama caught break after break. Although the economy wasn't roaring back to life, neither the European banking crisis nor the unrest in the Middle East had caused it to nosedive. Meanwhile, Romney's ineptness staggered Clinton. After the release of the 47 percent video, he remarked to a friend that, while Mitt was a decent man, he was in the wrong line of work. ("He really shouldn't be speaking to people in public.") As for Obama, Clinton trotted out for his pals the same line again and again: "He's luckier than a dog with two dicks."

Though the first debate brought the incumbent's streak of good fortune to a crashing halt, Clinton was insistent that the Obamas not overreact. On the phone to Axelrod, 42 counseled restraint at Hofstra, warning that if 44 was too hot or negative in a town hall debate it would backfire. Now, at the end of the Priorities event, the presidents went off to huddle on one of Casa Katzenberg's two immense porches, where Clinton repeated the advice. Don't try to make up the ground you lost, he said. Just be yourself.

Obama faced a more immediate challenge, which was to arrest the metastasizing panic among his supporters. In 2008, Plouffe had airily dismissed Democrats who lost their minds in the midst of Palinmania as "bed-wetters." But now there was a similar drizzle as the public polls sharply narrowed—and worse. On October 8, Pew Research released a survey that put Romney ahead 49 to 45 percent among likely voters. "Did Barack Obama just throw the entire election away?" blared the title of another Andrew Sullivan blog post.

Chicago's internal polling strongly suggested that he had not. After tightening for seventy-two hours post-Denver, the numbers stabilized, with Obama still holding a 50–47 lead over Romney. The only fallout, by Benenson's reckoning, was that Republican-leaning independent voters who fled Romney's column in the wake of the 47 percent had returned there. What Denver had done was wash away Democratic gains of September. The race was back to where it had been following the conventions.

Benenson's data made it easier for Obama to do what he had to do: buck up his supporters, his staff, and himself. As the full desolation of his Denver performance sank in, the president was consumed by a sense of responsibility for the fallout—and shadowed by fears, for the first time in months, that his reelection was at risk. Outwardly, he took pains to project the opposite. When his staffers asked how he was doing, he replied, emphatically, "I'M GREAT." To Plouffe, who had volunteered to soothe Sullivan, Obama joked, Someone's gotta talk him off the ledge!

Returning from the West Coast to the White House, the president conducted his first post-Denver national television interview, with ABC News on October 10. Faced with an onslaught of debate-related questions from Diane Sawyer—"What happened?" "Why did it happen?" "Was it the attitude?" "What did Mrs. Obama say?"—he maintained a steadfast composure. In a radio interview with Tom Joyner, he was coolly assertive: "As some of these e-mails that go around with my picture on them say—and I can't quote the entire thing, but—I got this!"

That afternoon, Obama met with his debate team in the Roosevelt Room. He opened by saying he had read a memo drafted by Klain a few days earlier about what went wrong in Denver and how to fix it before Hofstra, now six days away. He agreed with most of it but wanted everyone to know that they hadn't failed him; he had failed them. "This is on me," Obama said.

"I'm a naturally polite person," he went on. Part of my problem is "errin on the side of being muted. We have to get me to a place where internally I'm not biting my tongue... It's important for me to be fighting."

There's a lot at stake in this election, Obama continued, and I think we're still in good shape. But we need to win these next two debates—and that's what I intend to do. I only wish we didn't have to wait another week. I really want to get back out there.

The debate team was buoyed by Obama's energy and determination. 
And they received another boost twenty-four hours later from his second in command, when Biden took on Ryan in the vice-presidential debate in Danville, Kentucky.

The undercard had been elevated from sideshow to marquee event the moment that Romney selected Ryan. But Obama’s bellyflop in Denver upped the stakes even more, with Chicago desperately needing a win — and a certain type of win — to calm the party’s base. Klain, Axelrod, and others on Obama’s debate team parachuted from Denver into Biden’s prep sessions in Delaware to urge the VP to be ferocious.”This is the storyline: goal-line defense, and you force a fumble,” Michael Sheehan told him.

Biden needed little encouragement. Having been in the spotlight four years earlier — when his televised tangle with Palin drew a larger TV audience than any of Obama’s toe-to-toes with McCain — the vice president had been cramming to tackle Ryan on policy. His confidence level was high. Now the Obamas were telling him that, for once, he didn’t need to ratchet down his Bidenness — he could just be himself. Hallelujah, Biden exulted. I never thought I’d see this day.

Ryan, meanwhile, took the stage in Danville feeling nervous — burdened by the sky-high expectations of the right. which was certain that he would massacre the boorish Biden, and by his own persistent worries about letting Romney down. Mitt’s been slaving away at this for five years, Ryan told his aides. I don’t want to make some gaffes and screw it up for him.

Ryan’s measured performance embarrassed neither himself nor the man who picked him. But Danville was Uncle Joe’s show. Before the opening bell, Biden was reminded by his advisers to smile. Onstage, he mugged, chortled, cackled, sniggered, guffawed, and threw his hands skyward. Seven minutes in, he accused Ryan of peddling a bunch of malarkey.”A few seconds later, the Obamas, having learned a lesson in social-media insta-spin from Denver, were all over Twitter with #malarkey.

The snap polls made the debate a draw. Boston and much of the conservative media accused Biden of being rude and borderline unhinged. (It was like the Joker showed up,” Romney remarked to Stevens.) Democrats were elated, as was Obama, who caught the debate on TV on Air Force One as he flew back to Washington after a day of campaigning in Florida.

“You did a great job,” he told Biden by phone. “And you picked me up.”

In thirty-six hours, Obama would set off for another three-day debate camp, in Williamsburg, Virginia. But watching his understudy had already provided him with one helpful insight.

“Those are not debates,” Obama observed to Plouffe. “These are gladiatorial enterprises.”

The first lady worried about her Maximus and his return to the Colosseum. In truth, she had fretted over the debates even before Denver. In July, around the time her husband’s prep started, she met with Plouffe and expressed firm opinions. That Barack had to speak from the gut, in language that regular folks could understand. Had to avoid treating the debates like policy seminars. Had to keep his head out of the clouds. (Michelle’s advisers paraphrased her advice as “It’s not about David Brooks; it’s about my mother.”) FLOTUS loved POTUS like nobody’s business, but she knew his faults well.

In the wake of Denver, she was unfailingly encouraging with her husband: Don’t worry, you’re going to win the next one, just remember who you’re talking to, Michelle told him. Before a small group of female bundlers, she pronounced that Barack had lost only because “Romney is a really good liar.”

Privately, however, Michelle was unhappy about how her spouse’s prep had been handled. The late arrival in Denver. The rushed meal at the crappy hotel. Not being able to reach Sasha and Malia by phone. He seemed over-scheduled, overcoached, and underrested. At first, she conveyed her displeasure via Jarrett, who flooded the inboxes of the debate team with pointed e-mails, employing the royal “we.” But the day before debate camp in Williamsburg. Michelle delivered marching orders directly to Plouffe: If the president wants our chef there, he should be there; if he wants Marty Nesbitt there, he should be there. Barack’s food, downtime, exercise, sleep, lodging — all of it affects his frame of mind. All of it has to be right.

Plouffe saluted sharply and thought. I guess the first lady understands the stakes here.

That same Friday, October 12. Obama’s debate team gathered again in the Roosevelt Room for a final pre-camp session. The president was presented with a piece of overarching advice and a memo, both of which would
have been inconceivable before Denver. The advice was: Be more like Biden, whose combativeness, scripted moments, and bluff calls on Ryan ("Not true!") had all proved effective tactics. The memo was an alliterative flash card to remind Obama of what it called "the Six As":

- Advocate (don’t explain)
- Audience
- Animated
- Attacks
- Answers with principles and values
- Allow yourself to take advantage of openings

Klain had no shame about such contrivances—whatever worked. His relationship with the president was not straightforward or particularly close. In 2010, Klain had wanted to graduate from Biden’s chief of staff to become Obama’s when Rahm Emanuel departed, but he was rebuffed directly by 44, who told Klain that he was insufficiently no-drama to step in after Emanuel’s polarizing reign. Klain, not for the first time, ditched government for private-sector enrichment. But he found the intellectual challenges and sheer buzz of politics impossible to resist. Right after the Denver disaster, he offered to resign from the debate team, but Obama refused to let him. Klain’s ego, pride, and future ambitions were all wrapped up in fixing what had gone wrong in the Mile High City.

He turned Obama’s prep regime upside down: new strategy, new tactics, new structure. In Williamsburg, there would be an intense concentration on performance, including speeding up Obama’s ponderous delivery. There would be less policy Q&A and more rehearsals of set pieces and lines that popped. Less emphasis on programmatic peas and spinach, more on anecdote and empathy. Contrary to Clinton’s advice, there would be plenty of punching to go along with the counterpunching. Fixating on likability was out; following instinct was in.

Camp commenced on Saturday at the Kingsmill Resort, on the James River. Lush and green, the site had none of the funky juju of Lake Las Vegas, though there was a touch of weirdness: the hotel was hosting a “Ferraris on the James” event, so the lawn out front was a shimmering sea of souped-up sports cars.

Two levels down from the lobby of the Resort Center, on the precisely built replica of the Hofstra town hall set, the president spent most of Saturday sharpening his answers with Klain and Axelrod. That night, his mock went better than any in Henderson or at the DNC. The debate team wasn’t ready to declare victory yet, but they were relieved. Obama’s friend Nespitt was exultant. “That’s some good shit!” he told the president, patting him on the back. “That’s my man! He’s back!”

In the Sunday daytime sessions, Obama showed still more improvement, honing a solid attack on the 47 percent and another on his rival’s economic agenda. (“Governor Romney doesn’t have a five-point plan; he has a one-point plan, and that’s to make sure folks at the top play by a different set of rules.”) As the team took time off for dinner before Obama and Kerry went at it again, Klain thought, Okay, we’re getting to a better place. Plouffe thought, He’s locked in.

A little before 9:00 p.m., they returned to the Resort Center. Obama and Kerry grabbed their handheld microphones and took their places—and the president proceeded to deliver the Mock from Hell.

Even before Nasty Obama snarled at Kerry-as-Mitt and Anita Dunn as CNN’s Candy Crowley at the 39:35 mark, Klain was mortified. The president’s emotional flatness from Henderson and Denver was back. He was making no connection with the voter stand-ins asking questions. He was wandering aimlessly, digressing compulsively, not merely chasing rabbits but stalking them to the ends of the earth. His cadences were hesitant and maple-syrupy slow: phrase, pause, phrase, pause, phrase. His answers were verbose and utterly devoid of message.

In Klain’s career as a debate maestro, he had been involved in successes (Kerry over Bush three times in a row) and failures (Gore’s symphony of sighs in 2000). But he had never seen anything like this. After all the happy talk from Obama and his consistent, if small, steps forward, the president was regressing—with forty-eight hours and only one full day of prep between them and Hofstra.

Obama and Nespitt went back to the Pettus House, a colonnaded red-
brick mansion on the riverbank, where they were bunking. Neibitt knew the mock had not gone well; Anita Dunn had asked him to talk it over with Obama. He and the president stayed up late playing cards, watching football, hashing out what hadn’t worked, how the president was still struggling to find the zone. “You can’t get mad” at Romney’s distortions, Neibitt said. “You come off better when you just say, ‘Now, that’s fucking ridiculous.’ When you laugh, that shit works, man.”

In Obama’s hold room at the Resort Center, his staff was moving past puzzlement and panic toward practical considerations. “What are we going to do?” asked Plouffe. The lesson that he had taken from Denver was that you could no longer count on fourth-quarter Obama; what you saw in practice was what you got on the debate stage. If he doesn’t have a good mock tomorrow, there’s no reason to believe that it’ll get fixed when he gets to New York, Plouffe said.

Two schools of thought quickly emerged within the team. The first, pushed by Bob Barnett—who in addition to his super-lawyer status was a longtime debate prepster and was there serving on Kerry’s staff — was that Obama needed to be shown video in the morning. “This is what we did with Clinton,” Barnett sagely noted. The other, advanced by Favreau, was that Obama should be given transcripts. He’s a writer, Favreau argued. Words on the page will make a deeper impression.

The full transcript was in hand within forty-five minutes—and became a source of gallow’s humor. As the clock ticked well past midnight, Favreau stalked read aloud some of Obama’s most dreadful answers. Soon his colleagues joined in, with Axelrod, Benenson, and Plouffe offering recitations and laughing deliriously over the absurdity and horror of the circumstances.

Klain regarded the video-versus-transcripts dickering as beside the point. Every day in Henderson and Williamsburg, the team had put Obama in front of a video monitor. Every day they explained what he needed to do to improve. Every day he said, “I got it.” But apart from momentary flashes of adequacy, nothing had changed; the idea that further illustration of his badness would fix things was folly.

Barnett and others believed that Obama’s playbook had to be stripped down more dramatically, to a series of simple and crisp bullet points on the most likely topics to come up in the debate. Klain agreed and wanted to go a step further. In 1996, Democratic strategist Mark Penn had devised something called “debate-on-a-page” for Gore in his VP face-off with Jack Kemp. Klain suggested they do the same for Obama: a sheet of paper with a handful of key principles, attacks, and counterattacks.

Axelrod and Plouffe thought something more radical was in order. For the past six years, they had watched Obama struggle with his disdain for the theatricality of politics—not just debates, but even the soaring speeches for which he was renowned. Obama’s distrust of emotional string-pulling and resistance to the practical necessities of the sound-bite culture: these were elements of his personality that they accepted, respected, and admired. But they had long harbored foreboding that those proclivities might also be a train wreck in the making. Time and again, Obama had averted the oncoming locomotive. Had embraced showmanship when it was necessary. Had picked his people up and carried them on his back to the promised land. But now, with a crucial debate less than two days away—one that could either put the election in the bag or turn it into a toss-up—Obama was faltering in a way his closest advisers had never witnessed. They needed to figure out what had gone haywire from the inside out. They needed, as someone in the staff room put it, to stage an “intervention.”

The next morning, October 15, Klain stumbled from his room to the Resort Center, eyes puffy and nerves jangled. He’d been up all night hammering together and e-mailing around his debate-on-a-page draft. In Obama’s hold room, the team gathered and laid out their plan for the day. They would screen video for the boss. They would show him transcripts. They would present him with his cheat sheets. They would devote the day to topic-by-topic drills until he had his answers memorized.

Normally, the whole group would now meet with the president to critique the previous night’s mock. Instead, everyone except Axelrod, Klain, and Plouffe cleared the room just before 10:00 a.m. Obama was on his way. The intervention was at hand.

Where’s everybody else?” Obama asked as he ambled in across the speckled green carpet, with Jack Lew at his side. “Where’s the rest of the team?”
We met this morning and decided we should have this smaller meeting first, one of the interventionists said.

Obama, in khakis and rolled-up shirtsleeves, looked nonplussed. Between his conversation with Neshbitt the night before and a morning national security briefing with Lew, he was aware that his people were unhappy with the mock—but not fully chided in to the depth of their concern.

The president settled into a cusby black sofa at one end of the room. On settees to his left were Axelrod, Plouffe, and Lew; to his right, in a blue blazer, was Klain, now caffeinated and coherent.

"We're here, Mr. President," Klain began, "because we need to have a serious conversation about why this isn't working and the fundamental transformation we need to achieve today to avoid a very bad result tomorrow night." We're not going to get there by continuing to grind away and marginally improve, Klain went on. This is not about changing the words in your debate book, because the difference between the answers that work and the answers that don't work is just 15 or 20 percent. This is about style, engagement, speed, presentation, attitude. Candidly, we need to figure out why you're not rising to and meeting the challenge—why you're not really doing this, why you're doing... something else.

Obama didn't flinch. "Guys, I'm struggling," he said somberly. "Last night wasn't good, and I know that. Here's why I think I'm having trouble. I'm having a hard time squaring up what I know I need to do, what you guys are telling me I need to do, with where my mind takes me, which is: I'm a lawyer, and I want to argue things out. I want to peel back layers."

The ensuing presidential soliloquy went on for ten minutes—an eternity in Obama time. His tone was even and unemotional, but searching, introspective, diagnostic, vulnerable. Psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually, he was placing his cards face up on the table.

"When I get a question," he said, "I go right to the logical." You ask me a question about healthcare. There's a problem and there's a response. Here's what my opponent might say about it, so I'm going to counteract that. Okay, we're gonna talk about immigration. Here's what I'd like to say—but I can't say that. Think about what that means. I know what I want to say. I know where my mind takes me, but I have to tell myself, No, no, don't do that—do this other thing. It's against my instincts just to perform. It's easy for me to slip back into what I know, which is basically to dissect arguments. I think when I talk. It can be halting. I start slow. It's hard for me to just go into my answer. I'm having to teach my brain to function differently. I'm left-handed; this is like you're asking me to start writing right-handed.

Throughout the campaign, Obama had been criticized for the thin gruel of his second-term agenda. Now he acknowledged that it bothered him, too, and posed a challenge for the debates.

You keep telling me I can't spend too much time defending my record, and that I should talk about my plans, he said. But my plans aren't anything like the plans I ran on in 2008. I had a universal health care plan then. Now I've got... what? A manufacturing plan? What am I gonna do on education? What am I gonna do on energy? There's not much there.

"I can't tell you that, Okay, I woke up today, I knew I needed to do better, and I'll do better," Obama said. "I am wired in a different way than this event requires."

Obama paused.

"I just don't know if I can do this," he said.

Obama's advisers sat silently at first, absorbing the extraordinary moment playing out in front of them. In October of an election year, on the eve of a pivotal debate, the president wasn't talking about tactics or strategy, about this line or that zinger. He was talking about personal contradictions and ambivalences, about his discomfort with the campaign he was running, about his unease with the requirements of politics writ large, about matters that were fundamental, even existential. We are in uncharted territory here, thought Klain.

More striking was Obama's candor and self-awareness. The most self-contained president in modern history (and, possibly, the most self-possessed human on the planet) was laying himself bare, deconstructing himself before their eyes—and admitting he was at a loss.

All through his career, Obama had played by his own rules. He had won the presidency as an outsider, without the succor of the Democratic establishment. He owed it little, offered less. He had ignored the traditional social niceties of the office, from the White House Christmas party photo lines to the swanky Georgetown soirees. He had largely resisted the media freak show, swatting away its asinities. He had refused to stomp his feet or shed
crocodile tears over the BP spill, because neither would plug the pipe spewing oil from the ocean floor. He had eschewed sloganeering to sell his health care plan, although it meant the world to him.

Now he was faced with an event that demanded an astronomical degree of fakery, histrionics, and stagecraft—and while he was ready to capitulate, trying to capitulate, he found himself incapable of performing not just to his own exalted standards but to the bare minimum of competence. Acres of evidence and the illusions of his fans to the contrary, Barack Obama, it turned out, was all too human.

Axelrod was more intimate with Obama than anyone in the room. The president’s humanity and frailties were no secret to Axe—nor was 44’s capacity for self-doubt. Since Denver, Obama had been subjected to a hailstorm of criticism, a flood of panic, and a blizzard of psychoanalysis. Like every president, he claimed he was impervious to it. But Axelrod knew it was a lie. All this shit is in his head, the strategist thought.

Look, said Axelrod softly, we know that you find these debates frustrating, that they’re more performance than substance. It’s why you are a good president. It’s why all of us feel so strongly about your winning. But you have to find a way to get over the hump and stop fighting this game—to play this game, wrap your arms around this game.

For the next hour, the three Obamans tried to carry the president across the psychic chasm. Plouffe reminded him of the stakes. “We can’t have a repeat of Denver tomorrow night,” he warned. “Right now, we’re not losing any of our vote, but we’re on probation. If we have another performance that causes people to scratch their heads, we’re gonna start losing votes. We gotta stop this now.”

Over Obama’s despair about his lack of an agenda, Plouffe and Axelrod took him on. “You do have an agenda, goddammit!” Plouffe said. “This isn’t a bunch of BS you’re selling. This is an agenda the American people support and believe in. But they’re not gonna believe in it if you don’t treat it that way, by selling it with great fervor. If you sell your agenda and Romney sells his agenda with equal enthusiasm, we will win.

“Think about this,” Plouffe went on. “You have two debates left. So take out Romney, take out moderator questions: you’ve got basically seventy-five to eighty minutes left of doing this in your entire life. That’s less than the length of a movie! You can do this! I know it’s uncomfortable. I know it’s unnatural. But that’s all. That’s the finish line, you know?”

Klain abandoned Paul Westphal in favor of a new sports analogy. The Tennessee Titans lost the Super Bowl a couple of years ago because their guy got tackled on the one-yard line, he said—the one-yard line! That’s where we are. The hardest thing for any candidate in a debate is to know the substance. You have that down cold. All we need is a little more effort on performance. You need to go in there and talk as fast as you can. You need to add a little schmaltz, talk about stuff the way that people want to hear it.

This isn’t about starting over, starting from scratch. We’ve got most of it right. The part we have left to get right is small. But as the Titans proved, small can mean the difference between winning and losing.

Obama’s aides couldn’t tell if their words were sinking in. “I understand where we are,” the president said finally. “I’m either going to center myself and get this or I’m not. The debate’s tomorrow. There’s not much we can do. I just gotta fight my way through it.

As the meeting wound to a close, the Obamans felt relief mixed with trepidation. Oddly, for Klain, the president’s lack of confidence about his ability to turn himself around was comforting. After all the blithe I-got-its of Henderson, Obama for the first time was acknowledging that a genuine and serious modification of his mind-set was necessary.

Plouffe felt less reassured. “It’s good news/bad news,” he told Favreau afterwards. “The good news is, he recognizes the issue. The bad news is, I don’t know if we can fix it in time.”

The full team reconvened in Obama’s hold room. Klain ran through his memo on the previous night and explained to the president the new new format for his prep: for the rest of the day until his final mock, they were going to drill him incessantly on the ten or so topics they expected to come up in the debate, compelling him to repeat his bullet points over and over again. Klain also presented Obama with his debate-on-a-page:

**MUST REMEMBER**

1. (Your) Speed Kills (Romney)
2. Upbeat and Positive in Tone
3. Passion for People and Plans
noon went on, the debate team concocted cutey catchphrases to cue him at the slightest hint of backsliding.

"Fast and hammy! Fast and hammy!" Klain would say when his delivery was too lugubrious.

"Punch him in the face!" Karen Dunn chipped in when he missed a chance to cream Kerry-as-Mitt.

For Klain, the turning point came that afternoon, during a session in which Obama was fielding questions from junior members of the team who were standing in as voters. Tony Carr, a researcher, introduced himself as Vito, a barbershop proprietor from Long Island, and asked which tax plan—Obama’s or Romney’s—would be better for small-business owners like him. Without missing a beat, the president savaged Mitt’s plan with verve, precision, and bite, closing with some good-natured joshing about Vito’s shop.

The perfect town hall answer, Klain thought.

That night, for the final mock, Kerry was instructed to bring his "A" game. With the team on pins and needles, Obama earned a solid B-plus. The contrast with the previous night was so dramatic, it called to Axelrod’s mind the triumphant scenes in Hoosiers. When it was over, the team rose in unison and gave Obama a standing ovation.

"All right, all right, all right," the president said, waving them off, smiling abashedly.

The next morning, before setting off for Hofstra, the team gathered once again in Obama’s hold room to review the mock. No one was remotely certain they were out of the woods. The past three days had carried them too close to the abyss for firm convictions of any kind. But the president’s mood could not have been more buoyant. Running through the team’s critique, he reveled in their praise of a particularly strong answer.

"Oh, you guys liked that?" Obama said, grinning broadly. "That was fast and hammy, right?"

As the President had been suffering his dark night of the soul, Romney was basking in the bright sunshine that had been bathing him since Denver. In Virginia on the day that the Pew poll put him ahead in the race, he stopped his motorcade to greet a gaggle of elementary school kids lining the
road to wave as he rolled by. Everywhere he went, his crowds were big and boisterous, telling him he was going to win the election—especially after he laid another beat-down on Obama in the next debate.

Romney’s Kingsmill was a Marriott in Burlington, just north of Boston, where he prepped with his team on the Sunday and Monday before Hofstra. Mitt was armed with his own debate-on-a-page, though his was even more miniature than Obama’s, containing just four bullet points. The second, third, and fourth were concrete and unambiguous: “Meet the attacks from the president head-on”; “Don’t just answer the question; speak to the questioner”; “Give specific contrast points on issues.” The first was more ineffable but also most essential: “The same Mitt Romney shows up” as the one who did in Denver.

Acclimating Romney to the town hall format was a central component of his prep. More than one presidential candidate had been tripped up by being untethered from a lectern (the grandpa-in-search-of-a-bathroom wanderings of McCain) or the vagaries of interacting with voter-questioners (Bush 41 staring at his watch). And Mitt’s awkwardness around actual human beings on the campaign trail had been amply demonstrated. Portman predicted that Obama would try to press his likability advantage by turning the debate into a touchy-feely-fest. In one of the mocks, Portman illustrated the point by answering a question from Myers while moving closer and closer to her—and then plopping into her lap as he finished.

The Romneyites were worried about another element of Hofstra: Candy Crowley. In negotiations between Boston, Chicago, and the debate commission, an agreement had been reached that the town hall moderator was to serve only as a neutral facilitator. But in a number of interviews, Crowley suggested that she intended to play a more active role. “Once the table is kind of set by the town hall questioner, there is then time for me to say, ‘Hey, wait a second, what about X, Y, Z?’” she said.

Romney was a stickler for rules of every kind, and had tangled (to no good effect) with debate moderators repeatedly during the Republican nomination fight. With Chicago in concurrence, Boston complained about Crowley’s comments to the debate commission to try to head off conflict later. But that did nothing to stanch Romney’s trepidation. At one point in Burlington, with Peter Flaherty playing the moderator in a purposefully aggressive fashion, Romney snapped, “Oh, be quiet, Candy!”

Team Romney assumed that Obama, having left so many bullets in the chamber in Denver, would come out brandishing Uzis in both hands at Hofstra. On the 47 percent, Mitt had his answer down cold; on Bain, he immersed himself in mind-numbingly detailed briefing materials on the firm’s investments. Bob White proposed another tactic: pointing out that Obama’s own financial portfolio included a fund with a distant connection to the Cayman Islands. That Sunday in Burlington, White showed up bearing research that illustrated the attenuated linkage. Though some of the Romneyites were dubious, Mitt was intrigued.

No topic in Romney’s prep for Hofstra was more vexed than Benghazi. In the month since the tragedy, the right had seized on the story in all of its dimensions: the security lapses beforehand; the limited military response the day of the attack; the administration’s explanation in the aftermath, especially the suggestion by UN Ambassador Susan Rice that the uprising had been a spontaneous demonstration as opposed to a premeditated terrorist attack. In Obama’s Rose Garden remarks on September 12 and two other speeches, the president had used the phrase “acts of terror” in the context of Benghazi. But on three other occasions when he was asked directly whether the attack was the work of terrorists, he had declined to say yes—fueling charges from the right that the administration was seeking to limit the president’s political exposure. Fox News was wall-to-wall Benghazi. John McCain was on the warpath and pressing Mitt by phone on the exigency of joining him there. On every rope line, all Paul Ryan heard was Benghazi, Benghazi, Benghazi.

Both despite and because of all the heat that the issue was generating, Boston wanted no part of it. The campaign’s research showed (as did Chicago’s) that Benghazi meant next to nothing to the small slice of voters who remained undecided. Stevens saw it through his usual prism: as a distraction from the economy. But debate prep forced the issue on Romney. He had to figure out what to say if the subject came up at Hofstra—which was likely, given the amount of news coverage it was generating.

The Burlington deliberations on the matter were interminable and quibbling. Romney feared that advancing any of the right’s main lines of attack on
Benghazi would leave him vulnerable to being blindsided by information to which Obama had access but Mitt did not. This isn’t a level playing field, he said. I need to be on solid ground.

In the end, Romney settled on soil that was not only solid but ultrareal—critiquing Obama for traveling to Las Vegas for a political event on September 12, in the aftermath of the attacks. If it had been me, Mitt said, I would have stopped everything, called all hands on deck, managed this thing. That’s what I did in Boston when we had the Big Dig tunnel accident.

With conservatives craving raw, red rib eye, Romney was planning to serve up tofu. Yet even the prospect of delivering this wan attack made Mitt slightly queasy. His grappling with Benghazi had already inflicted too much damage on the campaign.

You know, he told Portman, I’m just not sure this is a winner for us.

BENGHAZI was much on Obama’s mind, too. The answers he rehearsed in Williamsburg on the topic were among his best: fiery and full of conviction. The way that the right was piling on Rice made him furious. His national security aide Ben Rhodes was convinced that Romney would assail Obama for having not labeled Benghazi a terrorist attack. Now, a few hours before the debate, as Obama ran through some final prep at a Marriott on Long Island, Rhodes walked him through the transcript of his Rose Garden speech, with its “acts of terror” language. The president rehearsed his answer again, with gusto. Boy, he nailed that, Rhodes thought.

For all the progress Obama had made in his Monday night practice session, his team was anything but serene as the witching hour approached. Backstage at Hofstra, Klain was a nervous wreck. One pretty good mock, one disaster in the past forty-eight hours, Plouffe thought. So which Obama shows up?

Just then, the president emerged from his holding room, a few minutes before heading onstage. He found Klain, Plouffe, Axelrod, and Jim Messina in the hallway.

“Guys, I’m going to be good tonight,” Obama said. “I finally figured this out.”

When the lights went up at Hofstra, it took all of one answer for the Obamans to realize that the president wasn’t kidding. Replying to the first question, a twenty-year-old college student worried about finding work after graduation, Obama looked eyes with the young man and spoke crisply and pointedly. In the space of six sentences, the president plugged higher education and touted his job creation record, his manufacturing agenda, and his rescue of the auto industry—plunging an ice pick into Romney by invoking “Let Detroit Go Bankrupt.” When Mitt cited his five-point economic plan in answer to a follow-up from Crowley, Obama let loose with his one-point-plan zinger. He was fast. He was hammer. He was gliding around the stage.

In the staff room, Obama’s increasingly giddy team kept track of his progress, using his debate-on-a-page as a scorecard, ticking off the hits one by one as he delivered them. On outsourcing to China (“Pioneers!”), immigration (self-deportation), women’s issues (Planned Parenthood), and more, the president was not only proving himself an able student but making Romney pay for every rightward lunge he had taken during the nomination contest.

Romney responded aggressively but with visible annoyance as he found himself forced to keep doubling back to answer attacks from minutes earlier, which made him appear petty and threw him off-rhythm. In Denver, Mitt’s propensity for gaffes had vanished as if by magic; at Hofstra, presto–changeo, it returned. Boasting of his commitment to gender equity in the Massachusetts statehouse, he referred to the resumes he reviewed for cabinet posts as “binders full of women.” (On Twitter, the Obamans were all over it: #bindersfullofwomen.)

About two-thirds of the way through the ninety minutes, Romney tried to roll out Bob White’s hit on Obama’s financial portfolio. “Mr. President, have you looked at your pension?” Obama asked.

“You know, I don’t look at my pension,” Obama said without missing a beat and with a mile-wide smile. “It’s not as big as yours, so it doesn’t take as long.”

The debate was now a little more than an hour old. The next question from the audience had to do with Benghazi. Obama explained the steps he had taken in the wake of the killings and then turned his attention to his opponent. “While we were still dealing with our diplomats being threat-
ended, Governor Romney put out a press release trying to make political points," the president said sternly.

Romney got in his jab about the inappropriateness of Obama's political jaunt on September 12. But, as Rhodes predicted, Romney went further. "There were many days that passed before we knew whether this was a spontaneous demonstration or actually whether it was a terrorist attack," he said. "And there was no demonstration involved. It was a terrorist attack, and it took a long time for that to be told to the American people."

Obama summoned his highest dudgeon and responded: "The day after the attack, Governor, I stood in the Rose Garden, and I told the American people and the world that we are going to find out exactly what happened, that this was an act of terror. And I also said that we're going to hunt down those who committed this crime. And then a few days later, I was there greeting the caskets coming into Andrews Air Force Base and grieving with the families. And the suggestion that anybody in my team, whether the secretary of state, our UN ambassador—anybody on my team—would play politics or mislead when we've lost four of our own, Governor, is offensive. That's not what we do. That's not what I do as president. That's not what I do as commander in chief."

Obama returned to his stool and took a sip of water. Romney, incredulous, began to splutter.

"You said in the Rose Garden the day after the attack it was an act of terror? It was not a spontaneous demonstration? Is that what you're saying?"

With an icy stare, Obama set a trap: "Please proceed, Governor."

"I want to make sure we get that for the record, because it took the president fourteen days before he called the attack in Benghazi an act of terror," Romney insisted.

"Get the transcript," Obama said—at which point Candy Crowley interceded just as she had promised (or threatened) she would.

"He did, in fact, sir," Crowley said to Romney. "He did call it an act of terror."

"Can you say that a little louder, Candy?" Obama said, twisting the knife in Romney's back. The crowd burst into laughter and applause.

Romney was incensed with Crowley, so much so that he momentarily seemed to forget about Obama and started quarreling with her. In the Romney staff room backstage, Mitt's people completely lost their cool. The moderator had stepped in as a fact-checker, intervening on the president's side in a dispute that was far from cut-and-dried—and where a case could be made that Crowley was wrong. Ben Ginsberg called the control room and shouted, "What the hell was that?"

Minutes later, the debate was over. The Obamans were ebullient. The president's performance hadn't been perfect, but judged against the standards of Denver (or the Mock from Hell) it was pure genius. As he came off the stage, Obama thought he had done well. But having initially misjudged his performance the last time out, he was slightly tentative. "That was good, right?" he asked his people.

Yes, sir, they said. It was.

Backstage in his holding room, Romney paced the floor in a rage, fulminating about Crowley. Ann was equally livid: How could she do this? How could she make herself part of the debate?

Mitt demanded to see a transcript of Obama's Rose Garden remarks. Astonishingly, in all of his prep on Benghazi for Hofstra, no one on his team had ever bothered to review it with him. Romney wanted to get out of the hall and back to his hotel ASAP. Instead he was told he had to cool his heels and wait for the president's motorcade to leave first—the evening's final indignity.

Six nights later, on October 22, the candidates met again, for the third and final debate, in Boca Raton, Florida, on foreign policy. For Romney at this point, the topic could hardly have been less inviting. Snarkit twice on Benghazi, convinced that the media deck was stacked against him, and dismayed that the left was painting him as a warmonger, Romney agreed with Stevens that there was no mileage in doing anything other than hugging Obama, moving past the debate, and returning to campaigning on the economy.

The president's team suspected that Boston might run this play but assumed that Romney would try to redeem himself on Benghazi—if for no other reason than to placate the increasingly fervid right. The first question of the night, from moderator Bob Schieffer of CBS, placed the issue of Libya directly before Romney. Ducking it completely, he spent two minutes talk-
ing instead about Syria, Mali, Egypt, and Iran and congratulating Obama for having eliminated Osama bin Laden.

Just as Hofstra left Romney scalded, it had emboldened Obama. In preparing for Boca, he abandoned any visible signs of resistance to the thespianism and dramaturgical devices that his team urged on him. Klain’s instruction shifted from “fast and hammy” to “ham with cheese delivery.” Obama laughed at that—and couldn’t help cracking up every time the diminutive (and very pregnant) Karen Dunn reminded him to pop Mitt in the kisser.

The most memorable line of the night demonstrated that Obama had taken both pieces of advice to heart. In response to a Romney charge that the president was reducing the military too much and too swiftly, Obama said contemptuously: “You mentioned the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military has changed. We have these things called aircraft carriers, where planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines. And so the question is not a game of Battleship, where we’re counting ships; it’s what are our capabilities.”

The pundits and the insta-polls all but unanimously rated the debate a blowout for Obama. In the space of eight days, the president had gone from the Mock from Hell through the crucible of Hofstra to the cakewalk at Boca. The final challenge of the campaign—and his career as a candidate—was behind him. Backstage, he walked over to Klain and put his hand on the debate coach’s shoulder. His delight and relief were both evident.

You know, I really have finally figured this out, Obama said. Just in time for the last debate I’ll ever do.