

2

PLANNING FOR CHAOS

The goal for any candidate—challenger, incumbent, or successor—is simple: persuade enough donors, staffers, activists and voters that their vision of where they want to take the country is credible, achievable, and preferable to that of any other candidate.

The very act of entering—or reentering—the presidential arena, knowing they might fail on the biggest stage in the world, induces great insecurity in the most alpha of women and men. To overcome that insecurity, before candidates step into a room to persuade people they should be president for the next four years, they first have to persuade themselves that “Not only should I be President...I am going to be President.”¹

The candidate’s security blanket is a message that they feel will persuade others they should be president. In 1988 Senator Joe Biden, for example, couldn’t run until he had refined and rehearsed every line of his stump speech and felt confident he would “get the ‘connect.’”²

As Biden soon learned, a message that connects is only the beginning of an effective campaign strategy; what matters is how voters regard the candidate after the other candidates have responded. It is not what sounds best when the candidate speaks, but what sounds best after the opponents have responded. Karl Rove, the strategist behind George W. Bush’s two

successful presidential campaigns, credited his high school debate experience for teaching him to look ahead several moves:

You had to be ready to argue both sides of the question on a moment's notice. So we picked apart our own arguments, anticipated the counter-arguments, and picked those apart, too. Gaming the debate out as many moves in advance as possible was great training for politics... It taught me that staying on offense was important and that once you were on defense, it was hard to regain control of the dialogue.³

Every candidate wants to control the debate so voters focus on the issues and personal qualities most helpful to their campaign.⁴ The last thing they want is an open debate on all issues. They know what they want voters to hear about themselves and what they want them to know about their opposition.

There is always an asymmetry between what the two candidates want to talk about. If one candidate wants to accentuate a large difference on an issue, the other will try to minimize that difference and argue that another distinction should be more important to voters. If a candidate stresses his position is in the mainstream of his party, the other will want to emphasize she is actually more extreme. If one candidate underlines how his record shows he is better than the perceived position of his party, the opponent will try to debunk that and show he is no better than the party record. If one candidate emphasizes his personal story, the other will likely emphasize entirely different personal characteristics where she has an advantage, or stresses her actual record of accomplishments.

No matter what jargon, catchphrase, or slogan the candidate uses, no matter what media the candidate uses, no matter which party the candidate represents or seeks to represent, the strategy reflects the lyrics to Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen's 1944 popular song:

You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative...

But what accentuates the positives and what eliminates the negatives? Which positives are most persuasive in *this* campaign and which negatives

most damaging? What makes the choice between *these* candidates so clear that there *is* no in-between, no ambiguity?

The term “Message Box” has become common usage for strategists describing campaign strategy. It is a simple tool to make sure that the many messages from a campaign are coherent, unified, and account for the actions of the opponent. It is used by organizations such as the National Democratic Institute to train candidates unaccustomed to free elections in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Nepal, and by activists and consultants in campaigns all over Europe and Latin America. It is a square divided into four quadrants:

- What the candidate will say about him- or herself
- What the candidate will say about his or her opponent(s)
- What the opponent(s) will say about him- or herself
- What the opponent(s) will say about the candidate

The goal is to keep the campaign clear and unified. Accentuate your positives, eliminate your negatives, and minimize any unclear “in-betweens” to maximize your advantage over opponents. It might look simple, but nothing could be harder than keeping a presidential campaign consistent and coherent.

A candidate only has unified messages if the campaign makes myriad difficult decisions based partly on fact, partly on analysis of the political terrain, and partly on intuition or experience. And a candidate’s messages remain unified only if she can adjust her message box during the campaign.

Each candidate wants to put his best foot forward and say things that make his opponent less attractive. Each candidate also wants to persuade voters she has the best understanding of the country’s problems.

Every diagnosis contains an implicit solution. A campaign has to define the nation’s problems in a manner that persuades voters one particular candidate is the best solution. It would be a mistake for a candidate to persuade voters they have qualities needed in the next president if a competitor has more of the same qualities.

I have analyzed the strategies and tactics for the candidates since 1948 in both parties. This message box contains the essence of options considered in a typical presidential campaign.

The Message Box

Note: Please do confirm whether the table column header styles have been set as per your preference.

<p>Candidate on Self</p> <p>Establish Character & Credibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal roots • Milestones • Record of accomplishments <p>Party and Reassurance: Relations to Party</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How different from party? • How more like the party than realized? <p>Definitive Difference with Opponent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals • Groups • Issues 	<p>Candidate on Opponent</p> <p>Undermine Character & Credibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flip-flops • Incompetence • Personal contradictions <p>Undermine Foundation of Vision—Cheap Talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistencies, “bad” votes • Associates with “bad” advisors or allies • Her donors have “dark” motives <p>Undermine the Difference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only good for “them” • Muddle their contrasts • Show contradictions
<p>Opponent on Candidate</p> <p>Undermine Character & Credibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flip-flops • Incompetence • Personal contradictions <p>Undermine Foundation of Vision—Cheap Talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistencies, “bad” votes • Associates with “bad” advisors or allies • Her donors have “dark” motives <p>Undermine the Difference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only good for “them” • Muddle their contrasts • Show contradictions 	<p>Opponent on Self</p> <p>Establish Character & Credibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal roots • Milestones • Record of accomplishments <p>Party and Reassurance: Relations to Party</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How different from party? • How more like the party? • How to update party? <p>Define the Difference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal • Groups • Issues

CANDIDATES ON SELF

Two quadrants focus on what the candidates will say about themselves. Each candidate decides what aspects of her past make her vision believable and resonant with voters. Credibility is essential yet hard to ascertain; to paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart’s famous comment about pornography, voters may not be able to define credibility, but they “know it when they see it.” Credibility is partly based upon assessment of the candidate’s motives, partly upon past performance, and partly upon believing that the candidate could, in fact, deliver if she were president.

There is no such thing as a perfect record—there are bound to be votes or policies that were popular in one state and anathema in another, or votes for small interest groups that contradict the candidate's current stance. Records depend upon the eye of the beholder. Does telling voters about wartime heroism make the candidate seem patriotic or militaristic? Do past legislative or executive successes in business or government come across as competence or bureaucratic babble and braggadocio?

People are more sensitive to information about motives than competence. A laundry list of accomplishments doesn't galvanize people who don't know anything about the character of the candidate. Al Gore, John Kerry, and Hillary Clinton all came out ahead on the issues. But as James Carville said, "The human mind revolves around a story... But we're selling a set of issue positions. The same thing always comes back: People always like our positions on the issues, and we always lose."⁵

Character and virtue are like moral firewalls. A good message box always establishes a candidate's values by talking about her personal biography or by demonstrating moral or religious passion.⁶ When voters trust a candidate, she can establish competence and dependability by discussing past personal accomplishments or past legislative results. Until trust is established, voters are unlikely to give her the benefit of the doubt.

To build trust with the voters and overcome unpopular policies, a candidate has to rely upon his home style. "Home style" was the term coined by Richard Fenno in his pathbreaking study of what representatives do when they return home from Washington. No legislator, he found, maintained support from constituents solely on the basis of votes in Congress. Every legislator inevitably votes for bills that antagonize some constituents or seem outrageously expensive, unnecessary, or silly. To shore up support, every congressperson worked to build personal trust and assure constituents that he was looking out for them. "Candidates want support, and they offer responsiveness; citizens want responsiveness, and they offer support," Fenno concluded.⁷ That exchange of trust could be done many different ways, but it always involved assurances that the politician was "one of us" and not only "of Washington."

What types of assurances persuade voters that the politician is "one of us"? Jimmy Carter highlighted his past as a peanut farmer and small businessman; Al Gore chose to announce his candidacy in Carthage, Tennessee,

instead of Washington. Gore's references to his service in Vietnam showed that he had not relied on privilege and education to avoid going—as had his likely opponent, George W. Bush. When Barbara Bush did needle-point along with hundreds of volunteers throughout America and when President George H. W. Bush put on a hard hat and ate chicken-fried steak with construction workers, they were trying to show that they were still in touch with regular Americans.

Candidates have to decide which past blemishes and failures to address directly and which they should try to ignore. Do they openly discuss their negatives and try to put them in the best light possible, or do they gamble that they can keep them out of the media? Governor George W. Bush had a well-known history of alcoholism and recklessness. He recovered from alcoholism, became a devout Methodist, and talked openly about how his faith in Jesus changed him. He refused to answer specific questions about alcohol or drugs (“when I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible”), and he demonstrated the authenticity of his conversion with testimonials and personal discussion of scriptures that persuaded voters that his past failures were not relevant to his current character.⁸

Candidates must also decide how to relate to their party. On the key issues of the moment, should they emphasize close connections with party positions or distance themselves from its orthodoxy? On whatever issues the voters care most about, the candidate from the party that voters believe is best at tackling those issues has the wind at his back; the candidate from the party believed to be weaker has a challenge because that candidate has to show she has a background—be it personal or political—that establishes her differences from the party record. Democrats are historically viewed as weaker than Republicans on welfare reform, so Bill Clinton positioned himself as more concerned about work than welfare by pointing to the ways his record in Arkansas made him a “new kind of Democrat.” To distinguish himself from conservative congressmen intent on slashing federal welfare and education programs, George W. Bush called himself a “compassionate conservative” and emphasized his focus on education in Texas and his strong personal belief that anyone living in the United States, legal citizen or not, needed education for the good of all.

OPPONENT ON CANDIDATE

The other two quadrants focus on what the opponent—or a journalist—is likely to say about the candidate. Each candidate must decide how to minimize the credibility of his opponent’s vision and programs. What kind of attacks on her opponent most enhance her own attractiveness? It is useless, after all, to assail an opponent in a way that hurts the attacker more than the attacked.

Each candidate decides how much emphasis to place on undermining his opponent’s personal biography versus trying to persuade voters that his opponent is not acknowledging his “true” record. A candidate will invariably say her opponent is not like the voters, doesn’t understand them, and thus cannot be trusted (while the candidate herself is, does, and can). He may find subtle ways to remind voters that the opponent differs from their region, church, ethnic group, or background. Or he might make a straightforward attack on the values of a group the opponent supports, like creationists, environmentalists, hunters, or vegans.

A ubiquitous tactic is to persuade voters that the other candidate is a flip-flopper who turns with the political winds. More than a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

Our opponents seem at a loss, both as to what it is they really believe, and as to how firmly they shall assert their belief in anything... [they] endorse now what they demanded repeal of earlier [civil-service law] and on the issue of Philippine independence they have occupied three entirely different positions within fifty days.⁹

Highlighting the personal contradictions between an opponent’s life and professed commitments is another common tactic. When President Gerald Ford’s campaign displayed the cover of the *Playboy* issue where Jimmy Carter had given his “lust in my heart” interview, they were trying to underscore the gap between Carter’s beliefs and the decadent lifestyle that magazine celebrated.

Senator Robert Kerrey, a prominent contender for the 1992 Democratic nomination, spent most of 1991 talking about the need for national health care legislation. When the campaign started in earnest, however, it soon came out that he had never provided medical coverage for the

employees of his businesses in Nebraska. A strong record as governor and a Congressional Medal of Honor winner from Vietnam provided no cover against the seeming inconsistency between his past behavior and future promises. Kerrey could neither explain why he had not mentioned the health care issue nor why it might not be inconsistent with his current position.¹⁰

RESPONDING TO ATTACKS

When a candidate is attacked, there are three possible options: push back, attack the attack, or push the envelope.

“Pushing back” refers to rebutting the attack, as in Richard Nixon’s famous “I am not a crook” speech. The problem with this tactic, as Karl Rove likes to say, is that “when you’re explaining, you’re losing.”

“Attacking the attack” means labeling the attack as mudslinging or scare tactics—old-style politics from an inferior opponent who has run out of ideas. A standard move has always been, as noted in 1940, “If your opponent calls you a liar, do not deny it—just call him a thief.”¹¹ When Arnold Schwarzenegger was being attacked by Governor Gray Davis during the California gubernatorial campaign in 2003, he said, “Gray Davis can run a dirty campaign better than anyone, but he can’t run a state.” Still better is having a highly respected ally attack the attack for you. In 1988, when Ohio Senator Howard Metzenbaum voted against a clearly unconstitutional child pornography bill, his opponent, George Voinovich, attacked him for being so liberal that he was not willing to fight child pornography. The single most respected political figure in Ohio, Senator John Glenn, went on television and said, “George Voinovich, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Get that ad off the air. This is outrageous.” Michael Dukakis cited the Metzenbaum attack as exactly what he should have done when he was hit hard on crime. It was “a hellapalooza of a mistake,” he realized, to “blow it off.”¹²

“Pushing the envelope” means continuing to advance a daring policy while brushing off the attacks as smoke screens, desperate attempts to drown out an issue because an opponent has no alternative. Early in the 2008 primaries, Senator Barack Obama was criticized by Senator Hillary Clinton for his naïveté and inexperience when he said he would meet with North Korean or Iranian leaders without preconditions. Obama, despite criticism from foreign policy experts, continued to vow he would go “toe-to-toe with

the leaders of rogue nations.” He kept to that position during the primaries and criticized Clinton for voting to brand Iran’s Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization, a move he emphasized could allow President Bush to expand the war against terror into another country.¹³

As simple as these options may seem, the appropriate choice always depends upon knowing what voters have already absorbed, how they evaluate the different responses, and what they care about. Correcting misperceptions and persuading voters is harder than winning a debate scored on logic. People often treat their beliefs like prized possessions they are unwilling to give up. Trying to correct them can backfire and strengthen them. In the heat of battle, it’s never obvious whether to send a particular message early or late in the campaign; whether it is better to reply to an attack now or later.¹⁴

THE PLAN IS NOTHING, THE PLANNING IS EVERYTHING

In war, as in political campaigns, “the plan is nothing; the planning is everything.” The strategic plan “lasts only until the war starts.”¹⁵ Candidates never know what will go wrong or where the miscalculations are most likely to occur.

On any given day a candidate will make simple, straightforward decisions, while other decisions are arrived at only after long, drawn-out staff meetings. Some of the seemingly simple decisions can blow up, and some of the well-planned, thoroughly analyzed decisions will lead to entirely unexamined, unexpected results with lasting repercussions. That was true for each of the three examples from the campaigns of Carter, Bush, and Gore. Seldom does everything go as planned, and frequently the most damaging outcomes were never thought to be remote possibilities.

Plans go out of date quickly. Ken Mehlman, manager of Bush’s 2004 reelection campaign, emphasized that a weak planning process means “winging it” and depending upon gut instincts that are often misleading in battle.¹⁶