

Along the Road to the White House: Covering and Recalling the 2016 Election

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We have all spent nearly two years following, assessing and, quite honestly, waiting to see when, or even if, as the saying goes, “the other shoe will drop.” So far, it hasn’t in the months since Donald John Trump repeated forty-two words that made him our nation’s 45th President. “I, Donald John Trump do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God.”

When you think back to the beginnings of the campaign, it became a discussion on the national news outlets of the impending conflict between a pair of political dynasties: the Bushes, who had twice already left their mark on the presidency, and the Clintons, whose political influence ran the gamut of political levels. In fact, before there was a President Obama, the name Bush or Clinton sat atop the national government for two decades. In a nation that worked hard at the beginning to separate itself from royal dynasties, we were under the governmental guidance of the Bushes and the Clintons for a generation.

So even before the first vote was cast, or even before the first candidate declared, we in the media would, hesitantly, tell you that we already had our November 2016 matchup. On the Democratic side, former First lady, U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton versus former Florida Governor John Ellis (call me “Jeb”) Bush on the GOP side—the “Back to the Future” campaign as I heard one journalist put it.

Hillary Clinton first announced her candidacy on Twitter on April 12, 2015, but it was a speech two months later on Roosevelt Island in New York, overlooking the famous skyline, that the public affirmation came.

Prosperity can’t be just for the CEOs and hedge-fund managers. Democracy can’t just be billionaires and corporations. Prosperity and democracy are a part of your basic bargain too. You brought our country back. Now it is time, your time, to secure the gains and move ahead. America can’t succeed unless you succeed. That is why I am running for President of the United States.

After Clinton’s original April 12 announcement, we asked a pretty important question, “Who in

their right mind would challenge her?” We would soon find out, just a month later in Burlington, Vermont, about the candidate who would cross swords with Clinton until the very end. He was a candidate we never saw coming: Senator Bernie Sanders: “Today, here in our small state, a state that has led this nation in so many ways, I am proud to announce my candidacy for President of the United States.”

Others would try their hand. Former Virginia senator Jim Webb, former Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley, and former Rhode Island governor Lincoln Chaffee all ran, but it came down to Clinton and Sanders.

Then there were the Republicans and they lined up, one by one, to seek the nation’s top office. South Carolina’s Lindsey Graham, Ohio governor John Kasich, the aforementioned Jeb Bush, Kentucky senator Rand Paul, Texas senator Ted Cruz, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, to name some of a seeming cast of thousands wanting to evict the Democrats from the White House. But this whole political game changed on one day. Now keep in mind, Donald Trump four times prior had considered a run for president. Three times he said no. Once, in 2000 he ran as a Reform Party candidate and that didn’t last long. On June 16, 2015, the billionaire, with the help of the indelible image of an escalator ride at Trump Tower, captured America’s attention and never let go.

We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again. It’s not great again. We need somebody that literally will take this country and make it great again. We can do that, and I will tell you, I love my life. I have a wonderful family. They’re saying to me, “Dad, you are going to do something that is so tough.” All of my life I’ve heard that a truly successful person, a really, really successful person, and even modestly successful, cannot run for public office. They just can’t hack it. And yet, that’s the kind of mindset you need to make this country great again. So, ladies and gentlemen, I am officially running for President of the United States, and we are going to make our country great again.

Around this time most of us in the media knew that for all the things that the Presidential election is, there were so many things this one would not be: normal, uncontentious or cordial. All of these things flew out the window.

Up to this point my experience reporting presidential elections took place when a candidate made his way to the town I happened to be in at the time. I’ve worked in local media in three cities: Charleston, South Carolina (my hometown) was and is a Republican stronghold in a fiercely conservative state. George W. Bush came through the state a few times while I was working there, and many of us who have been around a while remember where the 2000 campaign—Bush versus Gore (and the unprecedented *Bush v. Gore*)—and that controversy took us. Then I moved to Memphis, Tennessee. It was like the Republicans of the state put all the Democrats in one corner. Memphis is a majority black and highly liberal city. When I got there, then Massachusetts Senator John Kerry had a lock on the Democratic nomination and came through the area to campaign. He eventually lost to George W. Bush in his re-

election campaign. While in Memphis I saw the beginnings of the rise of Barack Obama in political stature. Then I moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, which, to me, changed as the wind blew. It is the state capital of North Carolina, and it always seemed that whatever party was in power at the state government level would rule the day. It was while I was there that the Obama train really got rolling. I covered three campaign events leading up to his election, and was in Charlotte covering the governor's race the night he won. I also covered Obama's second run for North Carolina Public Radio.

In January of 2015, when I started my job at Fox News Radio, I knew the time was coming that we, as a national outlet, would be closely tailing the candidates. Given that we were who we were, we were going to be closely associated with the Grand Old Party whether we liked it or not.

You will remember that well before the Iowa votes were counted, then-candidate Trump participated in several pre-primary debates, including that infamous first GOP Primary debate in Cleveland. It is widely remembered for the first question he got from former Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly, a question I believe shaped his adversarial relationship with the media that continues to this day.

One of the things that people love about you is that you speak your mind and you don't use a politician's filter. However, that is not without its downsides, in particular, when it comes to women. You've called women you don't like "fat pigs," "dogs," "slobs," and "disgusting animals." For the record, it was well beyond Rosie O'Donnell. Your Twitter account is filled with disparaging comments about women's looks. You once told a contestant on "The Celebrity Apprentice" that it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees. Does that sound to you like the temperament of a man we should elect as President? How will you answer the charge from Hillary Clinton, who is likely to be the Democratic nominee, that you are a part of the war on women?

In response, Trump said:

I think the big problem that this country has is being politically correct. I have been challenged by so many people, and I don't frankly have time for total political correctness. To be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don't win anymore. We lose to China, we lose to Mexico, and we lose to everybody. Frankly, what I say, and oftentimes, it is fun and kidding, is what I say. Honestly Megyn, if you don't like it, I'm sorry. I've been very nice to you, although I could probably, maybe not be, based on the way you have treated me.

My first trip to cover the 2016 campaign was to a state I was very familiar with: South Carolina. I spent five days in my home state getting home-cooked meals and covering two debates: the first was the GOP debate in mid-January in North Charleston, and a few days later I moved on down to Charleston to cover the Democrats. At that point I didn't always know what to expect from the plethora of Republicans and the three Democrats: Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Martin O'Malley. That Democratic debate really solidified whom the top two candidates were on that side, and it pretty much stayed that way until the bitter end.

I had never been to New Hampshire, the first primary state. This was just after Texas senator Ted Cruz jumped out to a somewhat surprising win in Iowa's caucuses to officially kick off the campaign.

One of the first things I usually try to do is walk the town and try to get a handle on what the folks are thinking. I found that New England is an area full of working-class people who were concerned about jobs, wages, and the future of their families under what would be a new president, whomever it would be, after eight years of Barack Obama. I also found out it was an area that was solidly behind Vermont senator Bernie Sanders; after all, it is his region.

In the snow of the season, I spent a lot of time out at St. Anselm College, where one of early debates was held. To me, that debate hit on many of the themes that the other candidate could never break through on: jobs, temperament, experience—all vulnerable topics for Donald Trump to many observers, and ones on which he was not expected to compete with established politicians. However, he wound up outcompeting them at every turn.

The next trip was truly to Bernie Sanders territory: Burlington, Vermont. I was specifically sent to cover the Sanders campaign, which by this time had really picked up some momentum. He was able to carve out a niche in the caucuses. While Hillary Clinton was winning the lion's share of the primaries, Sanders won the caucuses. He took several in a row during one stretch. I think there was a solid reason for this. When you go into a voting booth, a lot of what may drive your decision, unless you've really thought about your choice, is name recognition. You close the curtain behind you and see the name Clinton on the ballot. You just might be apt to vote for the name you recognize. The thing about caucuses is that they are discussions in small groups about the issues. The more people seemed to discuss the nuances of the campaigns, the more they seemed to like what Bernie Sanders was saying. Again, that was a prime reason for his campaign longevity. That Super Tuesday election in Vermont, Sanders vowed to be in it for the long haul.

Ten months ago, as you know better than any other group in America, as we were out on the lake, we were at three percent in the polls. We have come a very long way in ten months. At the end of tonight, fifteen states will have voted and thirty-five states remain. Let me assure you, we are going to take our fight for economic justice, for social justice, for environmental sanity, for a world of peace, to every one of those states.

Many state primaries and caucuses ticked by. While Sanders and Clinton battled it out, Donald Trump was in a game of "King of the Mountain," knocking Republican candidates out one by one. On March 15, FOX sent me to Houston to cover the Ted Cruz campaign. On that day there were six Republican primaries: Florida, Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, and in the Northern Mariana Islands. There were some states in that bunch that Ted Cruz needed to win in order to remain viable in the campaign. When all was said and done, Trump won every race that night except one, in Ohio, and Ohio's governor John Kasich won the Buckeye State. That night Florida senator Marco Rubio dropped out of the race. Cruz spoke to supporters in Houston once the results were in tossing down the gauntlet.

Every Republican has a clear choice. Only two campaigns have a plausible path to the nomination: ours and Donald Trump's. Nobody else has any mathematical possibility. Only one campaign has

beaten Donald Trump over and over and over again. Not once, not twice, not three times, but nine times, all across the country: from Alaska to Maine. Going forward, the choice is straightforward. Do you want a candidate who shares your values, or a candidate who has spent decades opposing your values? The mainstream media, the network suits, who make decisions, want Donald Trump as the Republican nominee. That's why they have given him hundreds and millions of free advertising because they are partisan Democrats ready for Hillary, and they know that Donald may be the one person on the face of the earth that Hillary Clinton can beat in the general election.

Wrong again, Ted.

By the end of May, Donald Trump had clinched the Republican nomination. Days after that, the now-presumptive Republican nominee got on stage at Trump Tower and took a shot at Hillary Clinton.

The thing I think I'm most proud of, not the fact that I'm watching Hillary, instead of Hillary watching me. We were supposed to be going into July and a lot of people said we wouldn't need to be doing a convention, that there was going to be a new convention in August. Here I am watching Hillary fight, and she can't close the deal. That should be such an easy deal to close, and she is unable to close the deal. So I am watching her, and we'll see what happens.

It did take some doing but candidate Clinton did eventually vanquish Bernie Sanders and at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, she stated her intention to make history by breaking the biggest glass ceiling.

We all want an economy with more opportunity and less inequality, where Wall Street can never wreck Main Street again. We all want a government that listens to the people, not the power brokers, which means getting unaccountable money out of politics. We all want a society that is tolerant, inclusive, and fair. We all believe that America succeeds when more people share in our prosperity, when more people have a voice in our political system, and when more people can contribute to their communities. We believe that cooperation is better than conflict, unity is better than division, empowerment is better than resentment, and bridges are better than walls.

Here we are. The matchup is set and the sights for Clinton and Trump would be firmly set on each other as the national party conventions rolled around in July.

We hit the backstretch of the campaign, starting with the national conventions. When last we brought the party faithful together the Republicans gathered in Tampa to nominate Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, while the Democrats convened in Charlotte to re-nominate Barack Obama and Joe Biden. As always around this time, the guessing game in the national newsrooms began. Who will each candidate pick as his or her running mates? On the GOP side there were several criteria that any Number Two would have to have: knowledge of the ins and outs of government, policy experience in general, and, most importantly, a personality that would not overshadow Donald Trump's.

In Indiana Governor Mike Pence, you found all of those things: rather vanilla, with the look of a politician. He knew a little something about politics inside the Washington beltway. Before coming into the governor's mansion, Pence served six terms in the U.S. House of Representatives.

I was not in Cleveland for the GOP convention, though we did have many of our folks at FOX Radio there to cover it. The nominee had a presence at the convention all four days. The convention had a signature moment, and, to me, it wasn't even the Trump address. It was Ted Cruz, who refused to fully

endorse Donald Trump even from the convention podium. “Don’t stay home in November. If you love our country and love your children as much as I know that you do, stand and speak and vote your conscience. Vote for candidates up and down the ticket, who you trust to defend our freedom and to be faithful to the Constitution.”

One night later it was Donald Trump’s turn to make his case against Hillary Clinton. He targeted immigration among other issues and gave us all a glimpse of what would come.

She proposes this, despite the fact that there is no way to screen these refugees in order to find out who they are or where they come from. I only want to admit individuals into our country, who will support our values and love our people. Anyone who endorses violence, hatred, or oppression is not welcome in our country and never, ever will be.

The search for Hillary Clinton’s running mate was a bit more challenging. She said many times on the campaign trail that her “personality” was one of her biggest challenges. A lot of people didn’t know her enough to like her very much and what they did know about her they knew through Bill Clinton. Those were not always the most positive things for her campaign. I was driving to Philadelphia in the days before the Democratic convention when I learned that Virginia Senator Tim Kaine would be her choice. I thought he would be a good one. Outgoing. Not too over the top. I thought the most important facet that he brought to the ticket was the fact that he was bilingual, but the Clinton-Kaine camp never used that asset much, I think to their detriment.

The Democratic convention had signature moments too. If I were handing out Academy Awards for convention performances mine would be: Best Speech to Michelle Obama. Best Supporting Speaker would go to Khizr Khan, holding up his personal copy of the Constitution for Donald Trump to read.

Donald Trump, you are asking Americans to trust you with their future. Let me ask you, have you even read the United States Constitution? I will gladly lend you my copy. In this document, look for the words “liberty” and “equal protection of law.” Have you ever been to Arlington cemetery? Go and look at the graves of brave patriots who died defending the United States of America. You will see all faiths, genders, and ethnicities. You have sacrificed nothing.

But the speaker who got everybody going in the hall wasn’t President Obama, although his remarks were very well received. The chief rabble-rouser of this convention had to be Joe Biden.

We’ve had candidates before who have tried to get elected by appealing to our fears, but they have never succeeded because we do not scare easily. We never bow. We never bend. We never break when confronted with crisis. No, we endure, we overcome, and we always, always, always move forward. That’s why I can say, with absolute conviction, that I am more optimistic about our chances today than when I was elected as a twenty-nine year old kid to the Senate. The twenty-first century is going to be the American century because we lead not only by the example of our power, but by the power of our example. That is the history of the journey of America, and God-willing, Hillary Clinton will write the next chapter in that journey. We are Americans, second to none, and we own the finish line. Don’t forget it.

The next night Hillary Clinton took her turn to hit Donald Trump and kick off the general election. Donald Trump said he had the temperament to be president. Clinton said flat out that he did not.

Imagine him in the Oval Office facing a real crisis. A man you can bait with a tweet is not a man we can trust with nuclear weapons. I can't put it any better than Jackie Kennedy did after the Cuban Missile Crisis. She said that what worried President Kennedy during that very dangerous time was that a war might be started, not by big men with self-control and restraint, but by little men, the ones moved by fear and pride. America's strength doesn't come from lashing out; it relies on smarts, judgment, cool resolve, and the precise and strategic application of power, and that's the kind of Commander-in-Chief I pledge to be.

That's what started the one-on-one battle for the White House. Next came the presidential debates. The first one was at Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY. For the first time, Trump and Clinton were face to face on the issues, making their final arguments in the weeks before America went to the polls to elect a new president. In that first debate, the sparring spanned from tax returns to jobs to healthcare reform, and this exchange that escalated pretty quickly.

Clinton: What I have proposed would cut regulations and streamline them for small businesses. What I have proposed would be paid for by raising taxes on the wealthy because they have made all the gains in the economy. I think it's time the wealthy and the corporations paid their fair share to support this country.

Trump: You take a look at her website, she's going to raise taxes 1.3 million dollars, and look at her website, it's no different than this. She said she's going to fight ISIS. Go to her website, she tells you how to fight ISIS on her website. I don't think General Douglas MacArthur would like that too much.

Clinton: At least I have a plan to fight ISIS.

Trump: You're telling the enemy everything you want to do. No wonder you've been fighting ISIS your entire adult life.

That really was the way it went, and also at the second debate in St. Louis, and even at the third and final one in Las Vegas. In talking to many people about the campaign on the streets of New York and plenty of other places I've been, one of the real turnoffs from this election has been the sniping between the candidates. If they could do anything to change the narrative of politics in general in this country, it's by changing the narrative from argument to discussion. They tell me there's no way we're always going to agree, but the discussion of issues is what usually leads to ideas, compromise, and consensus. I can't disagree with that.

As we got closer to November, things started look less hot for the Democrats, for a couple of reasons. The constant dribs and drabs of DNC emails put out by WikiLeaks did quite a bit to stick a knife in the back of the Democratic Party. This problem went back as far as the Democratic convention, when party chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz was forced to step down in the wake of emails being released that seemed to show that there was a bias against Bernie Sanders and in favor of Hillary Clinton among the party leadership.

Then just days before the election, FBI Director James Comey announced a renewed investigation into Secretary Clinton's emails. Even though the new probe found nothing, some will tell you that that may have been the final nail in the coffin for the Democrats' chances of keeping the White

House.

I was assigned to walk just about six blocks from our offices on 6th Avenue in New York to the Hilton Midtown where the Trumps and their campaign would watch the returns on election night. At that point going in, we still felt fairly certain that when all was said and done, Hillary Clinton would likely be the next President of the United States. The polls started closing, and Donald Trump won several key states: Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Michigan, and Wisconsin. It got to a point where that last holdout—the very state, Pennsylvania—would decide the day. At 2:39 a.m. Eastern time on November 9 . . . well, I'll let Fox's Bret Baier tell it.

Pennsylvania has been called for Donald Trump, which means that Donald Trump will be the 45th President of the United States, winning the most unreal election we have ever seen. This candidacy started on an escalator ride one year ago, and going down against sixteen Republican candidates. What started off as unlikely and impossible is now reality. He said he was always a winner, and this win did not come without controversy. The billionaire entrepreneur and TV reality star has defeated the candidate once figured to be undefeatable, besting Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in an electoral college victory that virtually no one saw coming a year ago, a few months ago, a week ago, and even yesterday. It has been a path to victory unlike anything we have ever seen.

Being there in the room, I can truly echo that sentiment. Some people in the ballroom were over the moon. Some had that jaw-dropped look about them. I think all, in some form or fashion, were asking the same question: what now? After a bit of waiting, the principals got the concession call from the Clinton campaign, and then came out to address bleary-eyed supporters and media. This part of the then-President-elect's comments raised a few eyebrows.

So it's been what they call a historic event, but to be really historic, we have to do a great job. I promise you I will not let you down. We will do a great job. We will do a great job. I look very much forward to being your President, and hopefully at the end of two years, three years, or four years, or maybe even eight years, you will say that it was something you were very proud to do. I can only say that while the campaign is over, our work on this movement is now really just beginning.

Many people I've talked to since the campaign began wondered aloud about Donald Trump's motivation for seeking the White House. Most who run for and win the presidency talk in terms of four years and eight years. Donald Trump did mention that in that last passage, but did you notice that he also mentioned two years and three years as well? Why would he say that? Remember a couple of things. Many have said one primary motivator for President Trump can be found in what he said at his initial announcement, that someone who is "very successful" or even "moderately successful" could not seek public office. He may have run to prove a point.

Or was it a veiled message to Donald Jr. and Eric? Remember, they are the ones right now who are in charge of Trump's company. Let us also remember that even to this day, the President has not completely divested himself from that company. Was he establishing a timeline for his sons? This remains pure speculation, but a viable option among several theories I've heard along this journey.

Where are we now? As we sit here on this beautiful campus, this is day eighty-eight of the “First 100 Days” of the Trump Presidency.

Donald Trump emphasized the promises he made on the campaign trail. First, the executive order on immigration, versions one and two. This is still in flux. Though the U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, or as I like to refer to the former Alabama senator, Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III—yes, that is his given name—did travel to a stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona to say that U.S. attorneys and border patrol agents were being empowered to aggressively seek out illegal immigrants.

His biggest success to date has been the appointment and confirmation of Judge Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court. It did take Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell employing the “nuclear option,” doing away with the sixty-vote threshold, in favor of a simple majority vote. But he did get that done.

Then there is Obamacare, or the Affordable Care Act. This has been the Trump Administration’s biggest loss yet. Democrats were solid in their opposition of the officially named American Health Care Act of 2017. Moderate Republicans said the number of Americans who would lose healthcare was too high to accept. Staunch Republicans felt the changes didn’t go far enough to be considered a true rollback of Obamacare. Essentially, no one liked it. So the bill was pulled, and another incarnation is said to be in the works.

Despite all the fits and starts, is there a reason for optimism? During President Trump’s address to a Joint Session of Congress in February, he said things that many widely regarded, even more so than his Inaugural Address, as his best to date.

We know that America is better off when there is less conflict, not more. We must learn from the mistakes of the past. We have seen the war and its destruction that has ravaged and raged throughout the world. The only long-term solution for these humanitarian disasters, in many cases, is to create the conditions where displaced persons can safely return home and begin the long, long process of rebuilding. America is willing to find new friends and new partnerships, where shared interests align. We want harmony and stability, not war and conflict. We want peace wherever peace can be found. America is friends today with former enemies. Some of our closest allies decades ago fought on the opposite side of these terrible, terrible wars. This history should give us all faith in the possibilities for a better world. Hopefully the 250th year for America will see a world that is more peaceful, more just, and more free.

I close with that because, despite all the rhetoric and despite all the division that we’ve seen over the past two years of the campaign and the election, we as Americans are a hopeful bunch. Every new administration has to find its way.

Part of the blame I place on us: the media. Many presidents and congresses did not have to deal with the twenty-four-hour news cycle before, say, Ronald Reagan. And even then, there was no social media. Now everyone with a smart phone can weigh in on the issues of the day. Again, we are only days away from the end of Donald Trump’s first 100 days as President. There will be lots more to talk, text,

and tweet about, but remember, one man does not make America. We all do. As long as we hold on to that, we will be all right.