

# Searching in Vain: The Failed Attempt to Find Ronald Reagan in 2008

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article provides an analysis of the Republican Party nomination for the presidential election of 2008 and discusses the result of the general election. It examines the campaigns of Mike Huckabee, Mitt Romney, Ron Paul, and John McCain as they battled their way through the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida primaries. Candidates' views on the issues, their financial support, and individual campaign strategies are considered and compared. The article concludes that the winner of the Republican nomination, McCain, struggled to invigorate the Republican Party and garner enough support to win in the general election. His performance in the campaign is measured and critiqued.*

The 2008 presidential election will be remembered as one of the most significant elections in the history of the United States. In the Democratic primary, a woman ran against an African American man for the nomination. Meanwhile the Republican Party attempted to find another Ronald Reagan-like nominee. Republican candidates strove to compare themselves with Reagan, yet no single candidate embodied Reaganite conservative values. The Gingrich Republican movement of the 1990s had morphed into Bush-fueled pessimism (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p.229). The low public approval of President George W. Bush—about 30% in 2008—created a general distaste for the Republican Party and further decreased the party's chances of winning the presidential election (Jones, 2009).

The search for a candidate in the mold of Ronald Reagan gathered a wide range of individuals across the ideological spectrum. On the left stood former New York City Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, a pro-choice, pro-gun control supporter of gay rights (OnTheIssues.org, 2008b). Despite these positions, Giuliani made a serious effort at a campaign, although he put very little effort into campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire, focusing on winning the Florida primary and the "Super Tuesday" states (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p.266). On the right end of the ideological spectrum stood Ron Paul, a libertarian-leaning congressman from Texas, who was affectionately known as "Dr. No" because he voted against nearly every piece of legislation and federal policy he came across (Gwyne, 2001). Between these were several other contenders who represented slightly different views.

Part one of this paper explores the campaigns of the four top contenders for the nomination: Mike Huckabee,

Mitt Romney, Paul, and John McCain, focusing on the positive and negative aspects of their campaigns. Part two focuses on the winner of the nomination, John McCain, and his experiences in the general election, critiquing his strategy while acknowledging the historical context of the election.

## I. Finding the Nominee

### *Mike Huckabee*

Although Huckabee represents core conservative values, he shares something in common with Bill Clinton—and it's not enjoying cigars. Both men are from a small town in Arkansas called Hope. Huckabee's rural roots presented him with a huge challenge: nobody knew who he was. As Huckabee wrote in his book *Do the Right Thing*, "It was my challenge as a virtually unknown candidate to convince [conservatives] that they ought to give 'hope' one more chance," (2009, p. 7).

Despite the fact that Huckabee was an unknown candidate, he was far from inexperienced. After serving as a senior pastor in Baptist churches for 12 years, he won a special election for the lieutenant governorship in Arkansas (Huckabee, 2009, p. 48). Huckabee attempted to run for an open Senate seat in 1996, but changed his mind when the sitting governor Jim Tucker stepped down due to his involvement with the White-water scandal, and assumed the governorship of Arkansas (Smothers, 1996, & Sack, 1996). He governed the Natural State for ten and a half years. Concerning his experience, Huckabee (2009) wrote:

I was not some guy who stepped out of a pulpit one Sunday and decided to become president. I was a guy who had spent longer than any of the major contenders for the office in the executive position of actually running a government, with measurable results in education, health care, infrastructure, prison reform, and the like. (p. 49)

Huckabee brought his Christian-driven political views to the campaign for the presidential nomination in 2008. His political views also included an adamantly pro-life, anti-gun control, and a tough-on-crime platform (OnTheIssues.org, 2008a). Additionally, Huckabee supported a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Huckabee, p. 19). Huckabee also highly criticized the current income tax system, proposing to eliminate the IRS and implement what he called a “fair tax,” a federal sales tax (Huckabee, 2009, p. 152–169).

While Huckabee’s stance on these issues would likely have compelled the support of many conservatives, Americans were still unfamiliar with him. Huckabee’s strategy to promote his candidacy was to focus on winning enough support in Iowa to beat his opponents and win some name recognition. According to the authors of *The Battle for America 2008*, “Huckabee had a one state strategy: Iowa” (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 270). His message appealed to the religious right, and many pastors actively endorsed his candidacy (Huckabee, 2009, p. 2). To combat his lack of name recognition and money Huckabee turned to the debates to promote his candidacy (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 269). Indeed, Huckabee wrote, “The debates became a major avenue of our getting the attention of the people for the message” (p. 58).

As a little known candidate, securing the funding to win the nomination was one of Huckabee’s tallest hurdles. In Iowa, his main challenger was Romney, who had millions of dollars at his disposal. According to the website OpenSecrets.org, Huckabee raised only \$13 million for the entire campaign (OpenSecrets.org, 2008a). Although Huckabee won the Iowa caucus, he had no real plan of what to do next (Balz & Johnson, 2009). McCain was making a comeback and was focusing hard on New Hampshire, Giuliani was banking his entire campaign on winning Florida, and Fred Thompson presented a challenge in South Carolina among the religious right.

After the Iowa Caucus, Huckabee fought to hold on to the campaign as long as he could, but after Super Tuesday, it was clear that McCain would be the Republican candidate. Lack of funding and lack of name recognition

severely diminished his chances of winning, as did a divided Republican party.

### **Mitt Romney**

Huckabee wasn’t the only devout religious candidate running for the Republican nomination in 2008. Mitt Romney was raised in the Mormon Church and had served as a missionary in France for two years (*New York Times*, 2010). Romney was a successful businessman, father of five, and a Harvard graduate. He served as the governor of Massachusetts for four years.

While name recognition was an initial problem for Romney, he had enough money to pour into his own campaign to make sure he was noticed. In contrast to Huckabee’s \$13 million (none of which came from his own pocket), Romney raised about \$107 million total, 42% of it from his own wealth (OpenSecrets.org, 2008b). The top individual contributions were from groups that included Goldman Sachs (\$234,275), Citigroup (\$178,200), Merrill Lynch (\$173,025), and Lehman Brothers (\$144,100); all top financial institutions (OpenSecrets.org, 2009b). Romney’s goal, according to Balz and Johnson, was to “win early and run on momentum . . . focusing on Iowa and New Hampshire” (2009, p. 251). Additionally,

The Romney team assumed he would never move up dramatically in the national polls until he demonstrated support in the early states. By sinking millions into early ads, he began to be taken more seriously. With McCain hobbled by fund-raising problems and Giuliani following an uncertain strategy, Romney soon led the polls in both Iowa and New Hampshire. Romney’s media advisor [Alex] Castellanos said, “When you put Mitt Romney on TV, good things happen.” (p. 252)

Romney thought he could pour money into these early states and knock the other candidates out of the game. What he did not expect was for Huckabee to be successful in Iowa. Evangelical Christians composed 60% of the Iowa Caucus; out of these, Huckabee won almost 50%, and Romney won about 20% (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 239). Not only was Romney’s faith an issue with evangelical voters, but he had the reputation of supporting gay rights and abortion. Opponents accused Romney of being a “one term governor from one of the most liberal states in the nation,” and, as McCain emphasized, “an opportunist and a flip-flopper” (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 239).

Losing in Iowa broke the momentum Romney was depending on. In the New Hampshire debate Huckabee,

McCain, and Fred Thompson all teamed up on Romney, criticizing his support for a planned withdrawal of troops in Iraq based on a timetable, a step they saw as a concession of failure, and his change in ideology (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p.280). McCain engaged in a serious campaign in New Hampshire and, although he and Romney split the Republican votes, won the votes of the Independents, further diminishing Romney's chance of winning the nomination (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 281). McCain was a huge obstacle for Romney. His campaign depended on Rudy Giuliani to slow down McCain's momentum in Florida (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p.284). Unfortunately for Romney, Giuliani faced issues with scandals from his history as mayor of New York City and lost support in Florida, and Romney lost to McCain.

Although Romney preached a message that was clearly conservative, had enough money to fund a strong campaign, and had the knowledge and experience to be president, he had several things working against him. One of these was his Mormon faith. Although there are many similarities between Christians and Mormons, this religious schism prevents the majority of Christian evangelicals in particular from identifying with or understanding many Mormons. This was evident when Huckabee won the support of evangelicals in Iowa. Another issue that haunted Romney was his alleged support of gay marriage and abortion, even though Romney had clearly changed his stance on these issues. Finally, he depended on winning in Iowa and New Hampshire yet failed to do so.

### **Ron Paul**

Ron Paul graduated with a medical degree from Duke University and served as a flight surgeon in the U.S. Air Force (Who Is Ron Paul?). He spent a total of about seventeen years in Congress as a representative from Texas before the 2008 presidential run. His advantages were name recognition and a consistent, unique approach to politics. He garnered support through a comprehensive grassroots movement, utilizing the internet to spread a message that resonated with those who were displeased with the direction the country was taking. In a 2007 article in the New York Times, Christopher Caldwell wrote, "The main thing that [Paul's message] has done thus far is to serve as a clearinghouse for voters who feel unrepresented by mainstream Republicans and Democrats."

In 2004, Keith Poole, a political science professor at the University of California, conducted a study that measured how conservative or liberal congressmen and presidents were. Poole found that Paul was the most conservative member of Congress. His findings are not

only consistent with statistical evidence, but also correspond with the personalities and political views of those measured, especially in the case of Paul. In fact, Paul was so conservative that Leonard Liggio, the executive vice president of the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, suggested that Paul and the Libertarian Party had strikingly similar political positions (2008). Paul opposed the Iraq War in its entirety, desiring to bring the troops home as soon as possible. This was his top priority (Who Is Ron Paul?). Paul also supported extreme cuts in federal spending; in 2009, he published a book titled *End The Fed*.

Despite the support that Paul may have secured, he was contending directly with Huckabee and Romney in Iowa, and Romney and McCain in New Hampshire. By the time the South Carolina and Florida primaries were drawing to a close, McCain had effectively wiped the competition off of the board. Paul, however, did raise almost \$35 million for his campaign, 99% of it coming from individual contributions, and only \$18,332 from political action committees (OpenSecrets.org, 2008c). While Paul spread a message that may have resonated with many disaffected Americans, his campaign was weak and did not focus on winning over the demographics that mattered.

### **John McCain**

"I was tied up at the time," responded McCain at a debate in Florida (quoted in Balz & Johnson, 2009, p.265). The time he was referring to was the year the Woodstock Festival took place. He was not referring to a previous engagement; he was being literal. In 1967, while serving as a Navy pilot in the Vietnam War, McCain's airplane was shot down over Hanoi and he was forced to eject, breaking his right leg and both of his arms (McCain, 2008). He then spent the next five and a half years as a prisoner of war (McCain, 2008). After his release and rehabilitation, McCain continued his military service until his retirement in 1981 to pursue the 1st District of Arizona Congressional seat in the House of Representatives, which he won. He later ran for Senate, won in 1986, and served for over two decades.

McCain ran against Bush in the 2000 Republican presidential primary and lost, primarily due to Bush's large amount of support and heavy campaigning in South Carolina. He had learned valuable lessons in 2000 and campaigned in 2008 as a "commonsense conservative," emphasizing experience in Congress and a thorough knowledge of the ins and outs of the military (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p.245). He opposed pork-barrel spend-

ing and supported tax cuts as did the other Republican candidates. What set McCain apart was his support of the troop surge in Iraq (Balz & Johnson, 2009). His initial strategy to become the Republican Party candidate was a challenge. He had taken many positions opposing the general Republican Party platform (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Additionally, he needed to detach himself from the unpopular Bush and the general distaste of Washington politics.

While McCain certainly had experience and name recognition, his campaign lacked the funding to run an aggressive campaign in Iowa. In the first quarter of 2007, Romney raised \$21 million, Giuliani raised \$15 million, and McCain had only raised \$12.5 million (Balz & Johnson, 2009). McCain made some serious budget cuts, focused on running a lean campaign, and on winning in New Hampshire. However, in order to win, McCain needed to refine his message. Initially, he showed reluctant but firm support of the troop surge in Iraq. At the time the surge was opposed by nearly 61% of Americans (Balz & Johnson, 2009). His support of the troop surge associated him with President Bush (Balz & Johnson, 2009). To make matters worse, supporting the surge lost him support from many independent voters (Balz & Kornblut, 2007). This was discouraging news to McCain, especially coupled with his budget problems. In order to create a new campaign strategy, he enlisted the help of Charlie Black, who worked on Reagan's 1980 campaign. His new tactic was to "be the last man standing," while the other candidates wound up knocking each other out of the race (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 261).

McCain eventually used his strong views about the Iraq war as the centerpiece of his campaign. In a debate at the University of New Hampshire, he emphasized that the surge was working. According to Balz and Johnson, "McCain later pinpointed that debate as the beginning of his comeback" (2009, p. 265). McCain rebounded and spent a large amount of energy on winning New Hampshire, a state he won in the 2000 presidential primary. His greatest opponent was Romney, who was weakened from his defeat in Iowa. McCain's message began to resonate with more independent voters and he won a large percentage of their votes while splitting the Republican vote with Romney (Balz & Johnson, 2009). After losing Michigan to Romney, his next challenge was South Carolina, a state that he lost to Bush in 2000. According to Balz and Johnson, "he was the candidate of the disgruntled: he was winning voters who were least likely to approve of Bush's performance, least happy with the war in Iraq, and most pessimistic about the economy" (2009,

p. 283). He again encountered challenges from Romney, whose campaign was somewhat invigorated from the win in Michigan. Additionally, Huckabee, Giuliani, and the fast growing yet short lived Thompson presented obstacles to McCain's "Straight Talk Express." After winning South Carolina, McCain faced the Florida primary—the state that Giuliani was placing his chips on. A closed primary eliminated the independent voters that had tipped the scales for McCain in previous states. Romney was actively pouring money into his Florida campaign in an attempt to lure conservative voters with economic talking points (Balz & Johnson, 2009). McCain was in a tough position and needed the win in Florida to propel him through Super Tuesday. Giuliani's scandals decreased his threat to McCain. Thus, the technique that McCain opted for was to pull an ace out of his sleeve and show it to the Floridians. The ace was Romney's support of troop withdrawal from Iraq based on a timetable (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Whether the technique worked or not is subject to speculation; however, he secured endorsements from both Senator Mel Martinez and Governor Charlie Crist (Balz & Johnson, 2009).

By December 31, 2007, McCain had raised about \$37 million (*Federal Election Commission*). Although McCain's wins in key primaries fueled his victory on Super Tuesday, he would still struggle to secure campaign contributions. He was criticized for his support of amnesty programs (Balz & Johnson, 2009). He also struggled to appeal to conservative Republicans, which was compounded by his failure to attend CPAC (Balz & Johnson, 2009).

McCain won for several reasons. First, Romney's plan of early state domination was thwarted by an unexpected win by Huckabee in Iowa. Second, McCain's message resonated with independent voters in New Hampshire. Third, Giuliani's weakened campaign allowed McCain to reach out to moderate Republicans in Florida, while Romney appeared to support more liberal ideas about Iraq. While this is not an exhaustive list of the reasons that McCain won the Republican nomination, they represent a major part of his campaign successes.

## II. Going to the White House . . . or not

Independent voters were a key to McCain's nomination in the primaries. He began the general election with an advantage among independent voters (Balz & Johnson, 2009). In order to win in November 2008, he would have to maintain and increase this advantage. Additionally, he

would have to separate himself from the unpopular President Bush while attempting to reconcile with and reunite the Republican Party. For all of this to be accomplished, McCain would have to refine his message and be highly selective with his vice presidential pick. Even if he was successful in maintaining a clear message and reconciling with the Republican Party, he faced a divided nation and a young, energetic, and popular opponent.

McCain finished his nomination process in March, three months earlier than Democratic nominee Barack Obama; however, instead of focusing on an early campaign in key battleground states, he took a “biographical tour,” focusing on areas in the country that shaped his character (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 301). This proved to be an ineffective technique and bought him little attention with the media. His message emphasized national security, tax cuts, and ending pork-barrel spending. By mid April, McCain increased his support among average conservative voters to the level that Bush had in 2000; even Rush Limbaugh expressed some support for McCain (Kuhn, 2008).

Although McCain was gaining support from the Republican base, his campaign was not where it needed to be. Balz & Johnson (2009) offered the following analysis of the campaign:

McCain looked old and tired, in contrast to his youthful opponent... His campaign structure wasn't working. His message was inconsistent. McCain seemed angry rather than inspiring. He projected disdain rather than respect for his rival. Relations with the press deteriorated. (p. 302)

The attempted solution was to bring on Steve Schmidt to help the overworked campaign manager Rick Davis. It was apparent that the campaign organization was in disarray and needed an overhaul.

A series of polls conducted by the Obama campaign determined that the main issue on voters' minds was the economy. It also determined that McCain's status of “maverick” was not known among the voters; rather, they “worried that he would merely be an extension of Bush;” their research concluded that “McCain had failed to use the spring months to distance himself effectively from the president” (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 303). Additional polling was revealing: “Fewer Americans called themselves Republicans. Many independent voters acted more like Democrats. The nation's ever-shifting demographics were creating greater competition in some regions, particularly the Rocky Mountain West with its increasing Latino population” (Balz & Johnson, 2009,

p. 305). As the Democratic National Convention drew near, McCain's vice presidential selection became more critical. He would have to play his cards right to appeal to the independent voters.

Another obstacle McCain faced was gaining media attention during Obama's “citizen of the world” trip to several countries overseas. Obama took the trip to show voters he was capable of being a foreign policy leader, while McCain embarked on his campaign in the States. The McCain campaign devised a plan to knock Obama off of his topic and put him on the defensive. This plan involved a television commercial that compared Obama's celebrity status to that of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, with the punch-line: “He's the biggest celebrity in the world, but is he ready to lead?” (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 313). While the commercial was obviously controversial, it accomplished its goal. In response to the commercial, the Obama campaign scaled back, giving McCain's campaign time, according to Balz and Johnson, to “regroup and devise a real plan to win the election” (2009, p. 313).

On the first day of the Democratic National Convention, Obama and McCain were tied in the polls (Balz & Johnson, 2009). At the convention, Hillary Clinton pledged to support Barack Obama and encouraged her supporters to follow her lead. Thus, women voters who might not have voted for Obama may have been persuaded to support him. With the media focused on the convention, McCain had an opportunity to finalize his vice presidential selection. He had many options, but the three most likely candidates were Romney, Joe Lieberman, and Tim Pawlenty. Although Romney became an avid supporter of McCain after losing the primary, choosing him would have created an elitist ticket (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Lieberman, the Democrat defector, was a great friend of McCain and the two agreed on many issues. However, Lieberman was pro-choice and supported increased gay rights (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Pawlenty was considered a safe choice due to his young age and probable lack of impact on the campaign (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Balz and Johnson (2009) provided this analysis of McCain's motivation behind the vice presidential selection process:

McCain believed he needed someone drastic to transform the presidential race . . . he needed to distance himself from the president . . . to cut into Obama's advantage among women voters . . . to energize the lethargic Republican base . . . to regain the one advantage he had always counted on: his identity as a reformer . . . Schmidt and

campaign manager Rick Davis believed McCain's only hope of winning was to make an out-of-the-box choice. (p. 326–327)

None of the popular picks would have been an out-of-the-box choice, except perhaps Lieberman. Although McCain was pro-life, having a pro-choice candidate on the ticket would've resulted in forty percent of his core supporters to be less likely to support him (Balz & Johnson, 2009).

The solution was Sarah Palin, the short-term reform-minded governor of Alaska who could help McCain regain support of women voters while emphasizing McCain's maverick credentials. Palin was a "down-to-earth mother of five, staunchly pro-life, pro-gun, an avid hunter, a runner, a beauty queen, a gutsy politician who championed limited government and individual liberty" (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 325). Additionally, she was what McCain needed to shift media attention away from Obama and to revitalize the Republican Party at the Republican National Convention. She was revealed to the public on August 29, the day after the Democratic National Convention. Obama had a six point lead in the polls after the convention, but Palin stole the attention of the media immediately. Retaliation however, was swift. The blogosphere became filled with rumors about her baby with Down syndrome, claiming that the baby really belonged to Palin's oldest daughter Bristol (Balz & Johnson, 2009). The McCain campaign responded by releasing information about Bristol's current pregnancy, rendering their claim an impossibility; additionally, members of the campaign staff became apprehensive about McCain's selection (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Would she be able to lead the nation if McCain died in office? Would she be able to handle the responsibilities of her job as vice president? McCain took a gamble by selecting Palin. However, one week after Palin's speech at the Republican National Convention, which "electrified the convention," it seemed like McCain had made the best choice. He had achieved a two point lead over Obama (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 342).

Soon Palin's honeymoon with the American public wore off. The financial crisis of September 2008 became the main concern of voters. Huge financial institutions were failing, adversely affecting the global economy. President Bush immediately called for legislation to provide \$700 billion to bolster these institutions and prevent a full economic collapse (Blodget, 2008). McCain's response was to suspend his campaign, cancel his first debate with Obama, and return to the Senate, an

other gamble for his campaign (Balz & Johnson, 2009). The gamble did not pay off for McCain. Republicans in the House of Representatives initially voted against the bailout, resulting in financial turmoil, although the bill finally passed on October 3 (Balz & Johnson, 2009). The results were devastating to the economy and the Republican Party. In early October, Obama was winning the support of voters whose primary concern was the economy by a margin of fifteen points (Balz & Johnson, 2009).

A series of interviews Palin had with the CBS anchor, Katie Couric, further diminished the chances of a McCain victory in November. In these interviews, Palin could not produce an example of McCain's experience regulating the economy, failed to recall a single Supreme Court decision other than *Roe v. Wade* that she disagreed with, and neglected to mention a single newspaper or magazine that she read (Balz & Johnson, 2009). This amplified the idea that she was not prepared to lead the nation and was uneducated about politics, especially on a national scale. The polls showed that her support was decreasing, especially among swing voters (Balz & Johnson, 2009). Schmidt concluded that "the Couric interviews represented one of the worst performances ever by a candidate for a national office" (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 356). To compound McCain's problems, Colin Powell endorsed Obama, criticizing McCain's judgment in selecting Palin (Balz & Johnson, 2009). As the campaign drew to a close, Palin's support from independent and swing voters continued to dwindle (Balz & Johnson, 2009).

McCain lost the election for many reasons. First, the country was dissatisfied with President Bush's performance. This distaste developed into skepticism about voting for another Republican presidential candidate. In order to mitigate this, McCain had to focus on a clear message that distinguished himself from Bush, something he had tried to do, but which was ultimately ineffective. Second, McCain's opponent engaged in a highly organized campaign focused on winning states that were historically red, targeting key electoral votes to ensure a win in November. McCain embarked on a national campaign, focused not on winning key electoral votes, but rather on campaigning to the entire nation. Obama also focused on bringing young voters to the polls, which proved to be a viable technique. McCain, on the other hand, did not have the focus or the funding to accomplish such a task. Obama raised a total of \$745 million, more than doubling McCain's \$368 million (OpenSecrets.org, 2009a).

The Republican nominees fought over the chance to win in a year of a divided party and an informed yet uncertain electorate. Huckabee's appeal to the evangelical Christians and conservatives gave him a chance to win the nomination, but his lack of funding and unclear strategy after the Iowa caucuses resulted in his loss. On the other hand, Romney had the money to spend, but his Mormon faith disconnected him with the evangelical Christians and his change in ideological views in 2004 made him look like a flip-flopper. Paul struggled to run an actual campaign and instead focused on spreading a message. McCain's strategy of letting the other candidates fail on their own terms and being the last man standing won him the nomination.

The general election demonstrated that between a young and popular Democrat with a message of hope and change and a Republican war veteran with decades of experience in Washington politics, Americans preferred the former. Both candidates took advantage of the resources available to them, but Obama's clear strategy to dominate the electoral map and the funding to do so proved to be too much for McCain and his campaign.

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