

POLITICS '92: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER MATTHEWS

Public Perspective: The prevailing judgment holds that the NH vote on February 18 was bad news for Bush. What do you think of the contrary interpretation that, in fact, the President should be quite happy with the overall results? After all, the real threat to him wasn't from Pat Buchanan—but from a possible Cuomo, or Gore, or Gephardt, or Bentsen run. Has the collapse of the Cuomo write-in movement, and Clinton's solid showing, effectively removed the prospects of Bush having to face someone from the "First Team"?

Christopher Matthews: Clinton will turn out to be a better candidate than Mario Cuomo would have been. Today's Cuomo is not the candidate that might have entered the race four years ago. Cuomo has positioned himself as a traditional liberal, defender of the welfare system. He is not positioned well to exploit the weaknesses of President Bush on the economy. New York is a problem. It's an easy target for the Republicans. Cuomo's personality would not do well in a general election. He would not do well dealing with the press, or even with the public. And, I think, Clinton has the potential to strengthen himself politically by dealing with the problems that have become apparent already. His ability to survive the attack on his personal life, and the revelation of the letter that he sent in the '60s concerning his draft status—to come back in polls under those circumstances—shows that he's a formidable challenger.

PP: Do you come down the same way with regard to Gore, Gephardt, and Bentsen?

CM: Gore isn't a good candidate. He wasn't a good candidate in 1988. He came off as stiff. He was unable to carry the South against Jackson. He was only able to carry the northern part of the South. He was unsuccessful in New York City—handling the vote there rather badly in the association he made with Mayor Koch. Gore simply has not demonstrated his ability as a presidential candidate.

Gephardt too has failed his only presidential test. He was unable to raise money on either of the coasts. His financial base was limited to Missouri and other parts of the Midwest. He has an odd appearance on television, which he has never quite gotten over. I don't know what he can do about his appearance on television; it seems vague and washed out. He's just not formidable.

Bentsen might, were he given the right vitamins prior to the election, turn out to be a hell of a candidate. In his 1988 debate with Dan Quayle, Lloyd Bentsen had the appearance of a man who was a senior member of a men's club who was rather bored with having to sit in on the admissions process. He was dull—not just in comparison to Dukakis, but in comparison to most living things. It's a mistake to argue that all these guys on the bench are better than the players on the field. You have to be revved up to run. You have to have ambition. And, you have to have some demonstrated charisma. The people you've mentioned don't have any. Has anyone ever suggested any of those people as having charisma? I don't go along with the theory that the people on the bench are better than the first team.

PP: You said recently on ABC's Good Morning America: "All the traditional liberals in this race got blown away. Harkin got nothing. Ten percent—for all the work he's put in up here?" How big a lesson is there in this? Is it mostly a commentary on New Hampshire and/or who the "traditional liberals" in the race happened to be, or further evidence of the general rejection of "traditional liberalism?"

CM: Tom Harkin, after all his talk, and anger, and campaigning, and pretty decent TV advertising, was rejected by 90% of the electorate. That's a serious verdict. A liberal with a smile, with a bit of charm, and jolliness even—like Tip O'Neill—would still do very well in some parts of

the country. But a stern, angry, strident liberal of Harkin's type isn't going anywhere. A Hubert Humphrey can still do well because he has an appealing personality and people like him even if they don't agree with him. You must really agree with Harkin to like him.

PP: So, it's a matter of the personalities, not the ideology?

CM: I believe personality can offset some rough ideological edges. Yes, I really do. I think Ronald Reagan's personality made his right wing tendencies acceptable to many, many people. Especially the Knights of Columbus type guy—northeastern Catholics who are middle-of-the-road or even conservative socially—who would like a Reagan, but reject a Jesse Helms.

PP: George Bush's popular standing has been on a roller coaster ride over the past four years—going back to the start of the 1988 campaign. Surely more than the economy is at work here. Are there other things that are at work for or against Bush? What are those things and how's that all likely to come into play in November?

CM: Bush is a popular fighter. People in 1988 came to applaud his challenge of the frontrunning Michael Dukakis. They came to applaud his challenge of the apparently ferocious Saddam Hussein. People like to root for George Bush against a challenge from the other side. The question now is, will they root for him as a man who's been unable to deal with the economic challenge of the country? So far, they're not happy with him.

PP: So, he's vulnerable?

CM: Yes, he's vulnerable because of the economy. Because historically if the economy fails to produce a 4% growth in real disposable income—income after taxes and inflation—in the year prior to an election, the incumbent party or president

loses. This pattern has been consistent. No one really expects the economy to grow 4% this year, after inflation and taxes. Therefore, the president is in trouble by historic standards. Usually people look at the economy and then at the candidates and find some way to justify the position they've taken on the basis of the economy. They decide they really don't like this Dukakis guy, or that they can put up with Bush, or they can risk Ronald Reagan. They basically make their judgments on economics and then rationalize them later. That seems to be the pattern. Explain otherwise Harry Truman winning.

PP: What does Bush have going for him? What are his principal strengths?

CM: He's a demonstrated diplomat, a superb diplomat. A totally honest person. This drives the left crazy, but he's totally honest. He doesn't steal, he doesn't have people around who do. There's been very little scandal of the money stealing type in his administration. He is a competent administrator. He is decent. He's a good family man, he's likeable. People enjoy his company. When they get little glimpses of his personality, they tend to like it. There is a lot for him to fall back on, plus incumbency. People are not quick to throw out an incumbent president barring economic emergency. Incumbents really have lost only twice in this whole century—Hoover and Carter. Gerry Ford lost, but he was never elected. So, I think that there are some real advantages in incumbency which can be exploited with the right campaign beginning in the summer. What he has to do is stay close and not lose his edge, not lose his sanity. He needs to do reasonably well in the debates with, probably, Clinton, and then be presidential for the last six weeks of the campaign. That's what I would do. Schedule early debates, and then be presidential for the last month or two. He has to debate, but if I were him, I would not debate near the election. It's hard to beat an incumbent president with the economy picking up even a little bit. It's hard. If the economy is picking up, he can use incumbency. If, on the other hand, he gets nervous and giddy and panicky, it could

be very bad for him. He's not at his best when he's panicked. Nor is anyone. But this guy Clinton is cool as a cucumber under pressure.

PP: What should the Democratic party leadership...?

CM: There's no such thing. Who's in the leadership? There is no leadership. There's no leadership in the Republican party either. People like Ron Brown and Rich Bond are administrators, staffers. Leadership is in the White House, and the person the President chooses to run his campaign. The President's the leader. He has Bob Teeter, who's as close to a leader as you're likely to find, and he's a pollster. Ron Brown wouldn't presume to make a judgment about who the candidate should be. He wouldn't presume even to tell the candidate once selected what to do. There's no such thing as politicians anymore. All there are are candidates and staffers. The days of the "politicians" are over. John Sears has pointed this out. We used to have politicians in the country, he said, people that weren't running for office, they were just politicians. They ran the country. Those guys are gone. Bob Strauss is in Russia, and he was never on a level with the big ones historically. There's no Jim Farley left. No, I don't go for the reference point that there are such a thing as leaders. I don't know who they are. Who are we talking about, the guys with money in their pockets? Who love to hang around politicians? We don't need these guys. These guys aren't leaders. They're looking around for the next boat to jump on.

The job of the DNC and the RNC these days is to hold the hand of the interest groups. And make them feel important. Do you know who the political director is? The political director is the one who takes phone calls from the NEA every day. Or the UAW. The NRA. They're hand-holders. Their job is to smooze with the contingent of fanatics who attach themselves to political organizations and keep them happy.

PP: What are the Democrats' major assets and liabilities as they operate on the national stage?

CM: The difference between the two parties is roughly that the Democrats believe in a much more activist role for government in domestic affairs. And the Republicans want almost a minimal role for government. That's basically it. And, every time things are bad economically, people look to the Democrats because they want something to save them, and the only thing that is available is government. It's very practical. And Democrats believe in investing in the economic development of the country, and that's historical reality. It isn't complicated. Clinton will stress that issue in the campaign—the issue of the responsibility of government to deal with the economic challenges in the country. He will position Bush as a Tory who is not that interested.

PP: Do you agree that the party's success or failure, in the large, is not much determined by the TV commercials it runs, but rather by its "public philosophy," its policies and approach to governing?

CM: Yes. I believe that the public philosophy is essential and people do find out by the end of a campaign which of the two candidates is an activist and which isn't. That was the case in 1932, 1960, and 1964. Activism isn't always the key factor, but it certainly will be this time. Which of the two parties is most ready to be committed to intervene in the economy and get it moving again. In 1980, the governing sentiment of the country was anger at Carter and a desire for new leadership. In 1984 it was contentment. In 1988 it was relative contentment. In 1992 it's anxiety. And throw the bums out is not the only solution to anxiety, like it was in 1980; the solution to anxiety is some sense, some promise of security. And, therefore, a strong Democrat who promises economic deliverance will win.

The historical philosophy of the Democratic party since 1932 has been a more active role in the economy and maintaining economic security and social security for people. And the economic philosophy of the Republican party has been laissez-faire, occasionally spiced up with what they called "supply-side economics," which is basically another form

of laissez-faire. Except Republicans do believe in big deficits now, which is different. But they basically don't see that as an active role of government. Basically, the parties haven't changed positions since 1932.

With the Republicans you tend to have an increase in unemployment, and with the Democrats you tend to have an increase in inflation. Do you want to put that more positively? Under the Democrats you tend to have a reduction in unemployment, and under the Republicans you tend to have a reduction in inflation. Those are such strong patterns in the last two or three decades that you don't need to have it written out. The Democrats are better at expanding the economy and creating employment, and not good at controlling prices; the Republicans are good at controlling prices, and not good at expanding growth and output and employment. Those are the facts. That's how people judge the parties. The words are consistent with the performance.

PP: Back to New Hampshire. What does the Buchanan performance mean? What about the Tsongas victory?

CM: Buchanan's 37% means that the President will be preoccupied for the next several months with an embarrassing as-

sault. There will be opportunities for the press to quote negative commentary on the President by his opponent on the right, and that will hurt him in the fall. For a number of reasons: (1) It will keep him busy; (2) it will force him to move to the right, which is not where the mainstream is; and (3) it will make him look weak. Pat is going to be able to address the convention in Houston in July. He's going to be able to give a damning speech on Bush, and it's not going to make Bush very happy. On the Democratic side I think that Tsongas will not be able to keep pace with Clinton. Clinton will turn out to be a formidable candidate, unless something qualitatively new breaks on his private life, in which case I'll wait and see how the voters react.

PP: But, Tsongas's candidacy is a flash in a pan?

CM: It will last about two or three more weeks. He can do very well in one primary one day, but the minute you have eleven events the same day, it's almost impossible. I mean, look at the size of Texas, for example. One state on Super Tuesday is so much bigger in terms of media markets and people than New Hampshire. You cannot "retail" that kind of a campaign. You can't go around giving half-hour speeches to everyone

and convince them you're serious or get them all to read your book. How many copies of his book is he going to be able to get around?

PP: So, looking into your crystal ball, what happens through the summer and into the fall?

CM: Pat will go on to do well in two or three states and maybe win one or two at the most. He will bother Bush, he will look good, he will force Bush to campaign. Bush will look ridiculous. Pat will be proud enough of himself and successful enough to go to the Republican Convention, and if Bush doesn't let him speak at the Convention, Pat won't endorse him. If Pat does get to speak, he'll give a very tough speech about "next time," and it will not help Bush at all. On the Democratic side, unless something breaks that really hurts Clinton, I think he'll win. On Super Tuesday he'll win. He'll tie the victory down on March 17 in Illinois. Harkin will be out of the race pretty soon; Harkin or Kerrey. It's hard to tell who will go first.

PP: And, then on election day?

CM: Right now, I think Clinton is winning. But I do believe it's tough to beat the incumbent. And if the economy's picking up it's doubly tough. I think it's going to be a close election.

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