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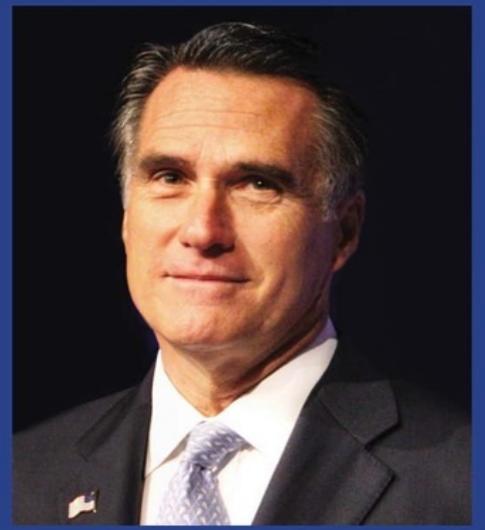
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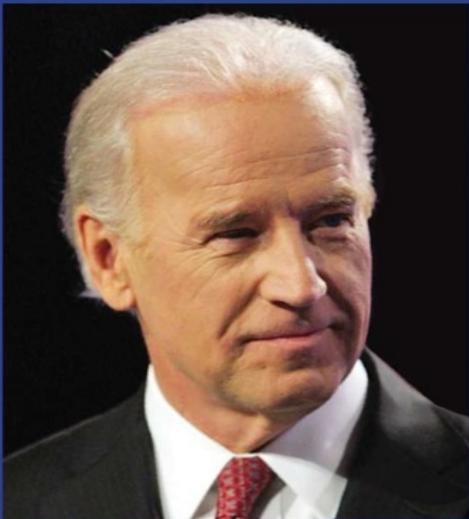
COLLISION



2012



OBAMA VS. ROMNEY AND THE FUTURE OF ELECTIONS IN AMERICA



DAN BALZ



Also by Dan Balz

Storming the Gates: Protest Politics and the Republican Revival
(with Ronald Brownstein)

The Battle for America 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election
(with Haynes Johnson)

Obama vs. Romney: "The Take" on Election 2012

COLLISION 2012

Obama vs. Romney and
the Future of Elections in America

Dan Balz

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*In memory of
David S. Broder and Haynes Johnson,
good friends and great colleagues,
who set the standards
for all who follow*

*And again, to Nancy,
for love and friendship,
and for everything*

There is a New America every morning when we wake up. It is upon us whether we will it or not.

—Adlai E. Stevenson II

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To the Reader

This book is a sequel to one I coauthored with Haynes Johnson about the 2008 election. That campaign was historic in many ways, and as I began this project it seemed unlikely that 2012 could deliver a story as rich or compelling as that one. As it turned out, 2012 *was* different from 2008 but in its own way just as compelling. The election of 2008 was the story of Barack Obama, the rise of what Johnson and I called “the most unlikely presidential prospect in all of American history.” The election of 2012 was a sprawling story about a divided America, the unusual cast of characters who sought to lead the country, and the underlying forces that helped determine the outcome. It was not an uplifting campaign by any stretch of the imagination. At times the plain nuttiness of it all cried out for Hunter S. Thompson to chronicle it. But both as political theater and as a window into the struggle between where America has been and where it may be going, it was as engaging as it was instructive about the state of our politics.

This book is based on several hundred interviews that were done over a period of two years. The interviewees included candidates, strategists in and outside the campaigns, citizens, and scholars. Most of the interviews were done on the record, although some of those were embargoed until publication of the book. Others were done with the agreement that the interviewee not be identified. The book is also grounded in my daily reporting and writing for the *Washington Post* during the course of the campaign. A few passages in the book are drawn directly from that work with the *Post*'s permission.

In so many ways, Campaign 2012 was a departure from what had come before. The basic architecture wasn't that different. For example, the calendar hadn't changed much from years past and still dictated the pace of the action and the movement of the candidates. But candidates were operating in a new environment. More money was spent than ever before. Super PACs taking unlimited contributions became a force. Polls proliferated unlike in any previous campaign. Debates played a more central role than ever. Social media, led by Twitter and Facebook, changed the way campaigns and the media did business. For the candidates, maintaining control of their campaigns in the face of these fast-moving forces was even more of a challenge in 2012 than it had been in earlier elections.

Campaign 2012 was one in which the best of campaign tactics and strategies collided with the immutable forces that do as much to affect the outcome as anything

candidates and their advisers may do or say. Economic cycles, demographic shifts, and the hardening of partisan lines shaped this campaign from start to finish. It was almost as if there were two campaigns playing out at once—the campaign on the surface that captured headlines and drove the commentary, and the subterranean campaign that was little seen but ever powerful.

Keeping track of all this tested the best of strategists, analysts, reporters, and political scientists. It was a campaign about big things but one often fought out in small ways. If 2008 was inspiring, 2012 was often negative and nasty—big stakes but not always a campaign to do them justice. By the time it ended, most Americans were ready to say good riddance. And yet from start to finish, it was an extraordinary story about a nation divided in search of its future.

CONTRASTS

The President

December 6, 2011

The presidential campaign year is set to open in less than a month and President Obama has come to Osawatomie, Kansas. It has been a long year for the president—endless (and fruitless) budget battles with the Republicans in Congress, unexpected political setbacks that left him in a funk, and, worst of all, a stubborn economy that has not responded well to his policies. Unemployment stands at 8.6 percent. By numbers political strategists watch closely, he is as vulnerable as any president seeking reelection in two decades. His presidency, which began with themes of hope and change, is at risk.

He is no longer the bright and shining politician who captivated the nation four years earlier. The once aspirational candidate of 2008 is now scarred by his battles with a militant and hard-right Republican opposition that has decided to no longer play by the old rules. His presidency has left the country even more deeply polarized than it was under George W. Bush. Many voters recognize the obstacles that Republicans have put in his path, and yet they wonder why this president, who offered so much promise, has not found a way to make the system work. No one is quite sure who he is or what he really wants to fight for.

The president needs a fresh start and a sharper edge. He needs a new way to set the terms for the coming reelection campaign. He has come to Osawatomie because it was where a century earlier President Theodore Roosevelt delivered his famous “New Nationalism” speech. In this same small town, Roosevelt argued that a strong federal government was necessary to protect ordinary citizens from the destructive power of big corporations.

Obama carries with him the text of a speech that seeks to build on the foundation laid by that trust-busting Republican president. He wants to frame the choice for the 2012 election as one of the biggest in a generation, a collision between competing philosophies about the economy, the role of government, and the well-being of the struggling middle class. He talks about income inequality and says, “This is a make-or-break moment for the middle class and all those who are fighting to get into the middle class.” Of the Republican approach he says this: “It doesn’t work. It’s never worked.”

This Obama is different from the one the country has seen, the assertive

progressive many of his followers have been looking for. He has set the terms of the campaign on populist themes, drawing the starkest of contrasts with the Republicans who have countered his every move for three years. He has found the ground on which to run. The day marks the real opening of what will be a high-stakes reelection campaign.

The Challenger

May 17, 2012

Mitt Romney is in Boca Raton, Florida. It has been a month since he freed himself—finally—from a long and destructive battle for the Republican nomination. The last of his rivals has been vanquished, the last in a string of candidates who rose unexpectedly, one after another, to challenge him for a nomination that seemed from the beginning almost within his grasp. In winning, he demonstrated that he understands many of the new rules of presidential politics, especially the importance and power of money. He has shown resilience and ruthlessness, qualities that any challenger to a sitting president will need.

But the primary campaign has left nagging questions about Romney. Inside his party there is still a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for the candidate. Obama, not their nominee, is the great unifier among Republicans. The former governor also is not very well known throughout the country, despite having run for the nomination in 2008 and having been in the public eye now for more than a year as he sought that prize for a second time. On the positive side of the ledger, he is seen as a devoted family man with a record of success in private business. On the negative side, he is seen as someone of such wealth and seeming privilege as to be a distant figure with whom voters cannot identify personally.

Romney is banking his hopes of becoming president on the pervasive disappointment that so many Americans feel about the economy. His campaign is grounded in this idea: that no matter how much people may like Barack Obama personally, they find him lacking as a leader. Romney has described the president as someone who doesn't understand how the economy works, whose policies are the antithesis of what is needed to get the engines of growth roaring again, and who is simply in over his head as a leader in a capital poisoned by partisanship. All that may be sound thinking, but only if the public warms up to him.

He has come to Boca Raton to the home of Marc Leder, a private equity manager with a flamboyant reputation. He has come to raise money, which he desperately needs to replenish his campaign after the long nomination battle. About 150 people have paid \$50,000 apiece to join the candidate for the evening, and as is customary he takes questions from the audience. Someone points out that more and more people have been told that government will take care of them. How can Romney persuade them to

take care of themselves?

Inexplicably, Romney takes aim at the 47 percent of the country he says will never vote for him, who are in Obama's column already. They act like victims, he says. They believe they are entitled to government assistance. As part of his rambling response, he says, "My job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." In one answer, Romney manages to reinforce all the stereotypes he has been fighting to overcome and sets out a worldview that sounds like the opposite of his opponent's.

Of course, it's all off the record, or so he believes. Off to the side of the room, unbeknownst to the candidate or his advisers, a small video camera is recording Romney's words, a political time bomb waiting to explode.

The People

October 15, 2011

It is a bright autumn weekend in Denver. I am in Colorado to talk with people about the country and the candidates. Colorado seems an ideal place to stop as the campaign year approaches. It symbolizes the changing electoral map and the emergence of the Rocky Mountains as a pivotal region in the upcoming election. Barack Obama claimed his nomination in Denver in August 2008, and the voters repaid the favor by giving him a handsome victory that November. But three years into his presidency, Obama's grip on the state is anything but firm. Colorado also is a good place to examine the possibilities and liabilities of the Republican Party. In 2010, Republicans squandered opportunities to pick up a Senate seat and the governor's mansion because of fallout from candidates closely tied to the Tea Party. Finally, Colorado is a laboratory in which to examine close up the shifting demographics and changing cultural attitudes that are altering American politics in real time.

What I hear underscores the dissatisfaction that forms the backdrop of the political year ahead. People see and feel an economy that is still inflicting pain on them and their families and friends. Anger with politics is palpable. People see Washington as a swamp of bickering and gridlock. When I ask one couple—a retired pharmacist and a retired teacher—about Washington, it is as if a huge spigot has been opened wide. Their frustrations spew forth. Republicans and Democrats are going down separate roads that never intersect, the husband tells me. “And if there's a bridge between them,” his wife says with evident disgust, “they'll burn it.” A retired electrician warns that public patience is limited. “People are angry and frustrated and have no focal point,” he says. “You think the Arab Spring can't happen here? Think again.” Another man points to the Occupy Wall Street protests that are then popping up in many cities. “It's kind of like a volcanic gurgle,” he says. “The mountain hasn't exploded, but it's rumbling.”

Onetime supporters of the president recognize the size of the problems he inherited and the opposition he faces and sympathize. But they wonder if he can be reelected. Some aren't sure he deserves to win. One woman who had backed him has lost faith in his leadership. “I don't think he knows how to bring people together,” she says. But the voters here are not yet impressed with what they see in the Republican Party. A few say Mitt Romney could be a presentable candidate. Beyond that there is little from

which to choose. “That is one of the problems of the Republican Party,” one woman tells me. “There is no one who is a strong leader who can gain support and bring things back together.”

My day in Colorado helps frame the questions that are at the heart of the 2012 election:

- First, how much do frustrations with the slowly recovering economy threaten the president’s reelection? This is the threshold issue of the campaign. Is the economy recovering just fast enough to save the president, or is the uneven pace deadly to his chances?
- Second, will the anger that is so evident manifest itself in some direct way? Will it strike against incumbents of both parties, or of just one party, as it had in 2006, 2008, and 2010? Will it give rise to a third-party candidate, like Ross Perot in 1992, who somehow harnesses those frustrations to affect the outcome?
- Third, how will perceptions of the candidates’ personal traits affect the outcome? How much will character and personality override other issues?
- Fourth, will polarization outweigh almost everything else? Are voters so locked into their separate camps that other factors become secondary to the cause of advancing the interests of red or blue America?
- Finally, can or will the election resolve any of the fundamental issues before the country? Will Campaign 2012 do anything to improve the prospects for governing in 2013 and beyond?

BOOK ONE

THE PIVOT

CHAPTER 1

On the Cusp of History

It ended where it began. On the evening of November 5, 2012, twenty thousand people lined the streets of the East Village section of downtown Des Moines. The golden dome atop the Iowa Capitol building stood in the background, brilliantly illuminated against the black sky. From the Capitol to the Des Moines River, the streets were cordoned off and had been for days, awaiting the president's arrival. Behind the stage sat the old headquarters from the first campaign—a squat one-story building that was now a church. For many in the traveling party, including the president, it was still familiar ground. Some of them could recall exactly where people sat four years earlier as they made the final phone calls to supporters during the caucuses in 2008. They remembered too their nervousness as they awaited the returns from precincts across the state and their elation when he had finally won on that frigid January night. It had all happened so fast, and now, even more quickly, they were at the end. The verdict would come the next day from the voters.

The whole team was there: David Axelrod, David Plouffe, and Robert Gibbs, the trio of advisers who led the first campaign; speechwriter Jon Favreau and his 2008 writing partner Ben Rhodes, now deputy national security adviser. Friends Marty Nesbitt and Mike Ramos were along for the ride. So too was Valerie Jarrett, the president's White House confidante and one of his and the First Lady's closest friends. Reggie Love, the president's irrepressible body man who was now off on other pursuits, had come back too. Jen Psaki, who had logged almost every mile with Obama in 2008 and spent time in the White House, was back as traveling campaign spokeswoman. Jay Carney had seen the 2008 campaign from the outside as *Time's* Washington bureau chief. Now he too was in the staff cabin on Air Force One as White House press secretary. Trip director Marvin Nicholson, who was also the president's golfing buddy, tried to keep the operation moving to schedule. It was like the end of a long-running television series in which all the characters from previous seasons had come back to make cameo appearances, Axelrod said. The whole family was back together one last time.

It was easy to forget how far Obama had come in such a short time, and how dramatic the ascent had been. He had been on the national stage barely eight years, beginning with that night in Boston in 2004 when as a little-known Illinois state senator he gave a keynote address that electrified the Democratic convention of John Kerry. Soon he became a vessel for the hopes and dreams of millions of Americans,

who had rallied behind him as he began an improbable quest for the White House. That first election made history and brought almost two million people to the Washington Mall for his historic inauguration day. He came to office amid great expectations and facing enormous problems. His presidency had been rocky—his aides called it a roller-coaster ride, which was a charitable way to put it—as he dealt with the deepest recession since the Great Depression, battled a Republican Party unified in its opposition to almost everything he proposed, and suffered a historic midterm election defeat just two years after he stood in Chicago’s Grant Park to claim the presidency. He was confident as he approached election day 2012—he was never one to lack for self-confidence about anything. But those around him could also sense the weight of the moment bearing down on him. He had told someone that he believed that everything—everything—about his presidency was on the line with this election: how he would be viewed by history, his legacy, his accomplishments, and the future of the country. He wasn’t nervous so much as he was clear-eyed about the enormity of the moment and the consequences of defeat.

The final swing had begun on Sunday, November 4, when he left the White House for a flight to New Hampshire. Bill Clinton joined him. The president and former president, tense rivals during those 2008 primaries between Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton, were now allies. They had campaigned together the night before in Virginia and were to do one last joint rally before splitting off in separate directions for the final day and a half of campaigning. On the half-hour ride from the Manchester airport to Concord, Plouffe and Axelrod joined them in the president’s limousine. Clinton was delighted to be back in the state that had saved his candidacy during the primaries in 1992 and resurrected his wife’s ultimately failed candidacy in 2008. “I love New Hampshire,” he exclaimed. New Hampshire summoned different memories for Obama’s team. They all remembered the pain of losing the primary there to Hillary Clinton when everyone believed Obama was a sure winner. Plouffe wouldn’t say he exactly hated the state, so he said, “We like New Hampshire, but we like Iowa a little bit more.” From New Hampshire, Obama had flown south to Florida and then back to the most contested of all the battlegrounds, Ohio, for an evening rally with Stevie Wonder at the University of Cincinnati. Hecklers interrupted him, one of them an anti-abortion demonstrator who gripped the railing of the balcony as police took him away. After the rally, the traveling press corps broke off from the presidential party and flew on to Madison, Wisconsin. But Obama had one more stop, a late-night rally in Aurora, Colorado. By the time he got to his hotel in Madison, it was after 3 a.m.

If Sunday was a grueling march across the country and back, Monday was a day of nostalgia and emotions, for the president and all those with him. Racing through the president’s mind, Axelrod believed, was the improbable journey he had been on and the finality of knowing that whatever came the next day, this chapter was ending. On one flight during the day, Obama said to Axelrod, Plouffe, and Gibbs, Listen, I remember the night of [the 2008 primary in] New Hampshire, you three knocking on my door and pulling me out of dinner with my wife to tell me that we had lost. If you show up at my door tomorrow night, just remember I’m still going to be president for two more months. Everybody had a good laugh at that, and Axelrod said, “No problem, Mr. President, we already talked about this. If someone is knocking, it’s going to be [campaign manager Jim] Messina.”