

Feb. 24: Ralph Nader, political roundtable

Ralph Nader, David Brooks, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Michele Norris, Chuck Todd

updated 9:34 a.m. PT, Sun., Feb. 24, 2008

MR. TIM RUSSERT: Our issues this Sunday: Many Democrats accuse this man of draining votes from Al Gore, which helped elect George W. Bush in 2000. Will he run again as an independent candidate for president in 2008? We will find out this morning. Our guest, Mr. Ralph Nader.

Then, The New York Times vs. John McCain.

(Videotape)

SEN. JOHN McCAIN (R-AZ): And I'm very disappointed in the article, and it's not true.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Clinton vs. Obama.

(Videotape)

SEN. HILLARY CLINTON (D-NY): Shame on you, Barack Obama. It is time you ran a campaign consistent with your messages in public.

(End videotape)

(Videotape)

SEN. BARACK OBAMA (D-IL): You can't be for something or take credit for an administration and 35 years of experience, and then, when you run for president, suggest somehow that you didn't really mean what you said back then. It doesn't work that way.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: New polls in Ohio and Texas, and the very latest NBC News delegate count. Insights and analysis from David Brooks of The New York Times, presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, Michele Norris of NPR's "All Things Considered" and Chuck Todd of NBC News.

But first, in 2000 and 2004, to the angst of many Democrats, Ralph Nader ran for president of the United States as a third party candidate. Will he run again this year? He's with us to announce his decision.

Ralph Nader, welcome.

MR. RALPH NADER: Thank you.

MR. RUSSERT: Will you run for president as an independent in 2008?

MR. NADER: Let me put it in context, to make it a little more palatable to people who have closed minds. Twenty-four percent of the American people are satisfied with the state of the country, according to Gallup. That's about the lowest ranking ever. Sixty-one percent think both major parties are failing. And, according to Frank Luntz's poll, a Republican, 80 percent would consider voting for an independent this year. Now, you take that framework of people feeling locked out, shut, shut out, marginalized, disrespected and you go from Iraq to Palestine/Israel, from Enron to Wall Street, from Katrina to the bungling of the Bush administration, to the complicity of the Democrats in not stopping him on the war, stopping him on the tax cuts, getting a decent energy bill through, and you have to ask yourself, as a citizen, should we elaborate the issues that the two are not talking about? And the--all, all the candidates--McCain, Obama and Clinton--are against single payer health insurance, full Medicare for all. I'm for it, as well as millions of Americans and 59 percent of physicians in a forthcoming poll this April. People don't like Pentagon waste, a bloated military budget, all the reports in the press and in the GAO reports. A wasteful defense is a weak defense. It takes away taxpayer money that can go to the necessities of the American people. That's off the table to Obama and Clinton and McCain.

The issue of labor law reform, repealing the notorious Taft-Hartley Act that keeps workers who are now more defenseless than ever against corporate globalization from organizing to defend their interests. Cracking down on corporate crime. The media--the mainstream media repeatedly indicating how trillions of dollars have been drained and fleeced and looted from millions of workers and investors who don't have many rights these days, and pensioners. You know, when you see the paralysis of the government, when you see Washington, D.C., be

corporate-occupied territory, every department agency controlled by overwhelming presence of corporate lobbyists, corporate executives in high government positions, turning the government against its own people, you--one feels an obligation, Tim, to try to open the doorways, to try to get better ballot access, to respect dissent in America in the terms of third parties and, and independent candidates; to recognize historically that great issues have come in our history against slavery and women rights to vote and worker and farmer progressives, through little parties that never ran--won any national election. Dissent is the mother of ascent. And in that context, I have decided to run for president.

MR. RUSSERT: As you know, Ralph Nader, they'll be Democrats all across the country who are going to find this very disturbing news, and they'll point again to 2000. This was the vote count. Al Gore winning the popular vote, but you've got 2.7 percent, nearly three million votes, in 2000. Then Florida, Florida, Florida. As you remember, George Bush won Florida by 537 votes. You've got 97,488. Democrat after Democrat says to this day, Ralph Nader, if your name had not been on that ballot, Al Gore would've carried Florida. Exit polls show he would've carried Nader voters 2-to-1. Gore would've been president and not George Bush. You, Ralph Nader are responsible for what has happened the last seven years.

MR. NADER: Not, not George Bush? Not the Democrats in Congress? Not the voters who voted for George Bush? But there were Democrats in Florida, 250,000 of them. You know, I wish we'd have Al Gore on this program someday Tim and ask him, "Why did you not become president in 2000?" And I think what he's going to tell you is he thought he did win Florida, but it was taken from him before, during and after the election from Tallahassee. Katherine Bush--you know the secretary of the state...

MR. RUSSERT: Katherine Harris.

MR. NADER: Harris, rather, and Jeb Bush, all the way to that terribly politicized Supreme Court decision. But the, the political bigotry that's involved here is that we shouldn't enter the electoral arena? We, all of us who, who, who think that the country needs an infusion of freedom, democracy, choice, dissent should just sit on the sidelines and watch the two parties own all the voters and turn the government over to big business? What's really important here is, if you want to look at it analytically, is there--Mr. Gore would, would tell you if he won Tennessee, anything else being equal, he would've been president. It's his home state. If he won Arkansas, everything else being equal, he would've been president. The mayor of Miami sabotaged the Democrats because of a grudge, didn't bring thousands of votes out. Quarter of a million Democrats voted for Bush in Florida. There is all kinds of thievery in Florida.

So why do they blame the Greens? Why do they blame the people all over the country who are trying to have a progressive platform, not just the environment. What was their crime? Why, why, why isn't there tolerance for candidates' rights the way there is a building tolerance over the last 50 years for voter rights? Because without voter rights, candidate rights don't mean much. And without candidate rights--more voices and choices--voter rights don't mean much. I--I'm amazed at the liberal intelligencia here. They are analytic and they deal with all kinds of variables, but when it comes to 2000 election, it's just one variable.

And I might add that Solon Simmons and other scholars--he teaches at George Mason--have shown that by pushing Gore to take more progressive stands, he got more votes than the votes he allegedly--were withdrawn from for the Green party. Twenty-five percent of my vote, according to a Democratic pollster, exit poll, would've gone to Bush. Thirty-nine percent would've gone to Gore and the rest would've stayed home. Every major--every third party in Florida got more votes than the 537 vote gap. So let's get over it and try to have a diverse multiple choice, multiple party democracy the way they have in Western Europe and Canada. This bit of, of spoiler is really very astonishing. These are the two parties who've spoiled our electoral system, money, they can't even count the votes, they steal--the Republicans steal the votes, and the Democrats knock third party candidates off the ballot. That's their specialty these days.

MR. RUSSERT: Barack Obama was asked about your announcement...

MR. NADER: Mm-hmm.

MR. RUSSERT: ...which you're going to--just made this morning on MEET THE PRESS and yesterday.

MR. NADER: Mm-hmm.

MR. RUSSERT: This is what Obama had to say. Let's watch.

(Videotape)

SEN. OBAMA: He had called me, and I think reached out to my campaign--it--my sense is that Mr. Nader is somebody who, if you don't listen and adopt all of his policies, things are not substantive. He seems to have a, a pretty high opinion of, of his, his own work. In many ways, he is a heroic figure, and I don't mean to diminish him. But I do think there's a sense now that, you know, if, if somebody's not hewing to the Ralph Nader agenda, then you, you must be lacking in some way.

(End videotape)

MR. NADER: Well, first of all, compare my Web site, votenader.org, and all the issues that Mr. Obama and Senator Clinton and Mr. McCain are not addressing that are supported by a majority of the American people. A majority of the American people support these issues. They want foreign and military policy not to just be an aggressive military situation.

But Senator Obama is a person of substance. He's also the first liberal evangelist in a long time. He's run a brilliant tactical campaign. But his better instincts and his knowledge have been censored by himself. And I give you the example, the Palestinian-Israeli issue, which is a real off the table issue for the candidates. So don't touch that, even though it's central to our security and to, to the situation in the Middle East. He was pro-Palestinian when he was in Illinois before he ran for the state Senate, during he ran--during the state Senate. Now he's, he's supporting the Israeli destruction of the tiny section called Gaza with a million and a half people. He doesn't have any sympathy for a civilian death ratio of about 300-to-1; 300 Palestinians to one Israeli. He's not taking a leadership position in supporting the Israeli peace movement, which represents former Cabinet ministers, people in the Knesset, former generals, former security officials, in addition to mayors and leading intellectuals. One would think he would at least say, "Let's have a hearing for the Israeli peace movement in the Congress," so we don't just have a monotone support of the Israeli government's attitude toward the Palestinians and their illegal occupation of Palestine.

MR. RUSSERT: But would you prefer, as an American citizen, to have Barack Obama or John McCain as president?

MR. NADER: What I prefer as an American citizen?

MR. RUSSERT: Yes.

MR. NADER: You're asking me? I'm running for president, for heaven's sake.

MR. RUSSERT: But as a citizen.

MR. NADER: I would prefer that the American people organize, that whoever is in president--is president, they give that person backbone.

MR. RUSSERT: How would you feel, however, if Ralph Nader's presence on the ballot tilted Florida or Ohio to John McCain and McCain became president, and Barack Obama, the first African-American who had been nominated by the Democratic Party--this is hypothetical--did not become a president and people turned to you and said, "Nader, you've done it again"?

MR. NADER: Not a chance. If the Democrats can't landslide the Republicans this year, they ought to just wrap up, close down, emerge in a different form. You think the American people are going to vote for a pro-war John McCain who almost gives an indication that he's the candidate of perpetual war, perpetual intervention overseas? You think they're going to vote for a Republican like McCain, who allies himself with the criminal, recidivistic regime of George Bush and Dick Cheney, the most multipliable impeachable presidency in American history? Many leading members of the bar, including the former head of the American Bar Association, Michael Greco, absolutely dismayed over the violations of the Constitution, our federal laws, the criminal, illegal war in Iraq and the occupation? There's no way. That's why we have to take this opportunity to have a much broader debate on the issues that relate to the American people, as, as, as a fellow in Long Island said recently, Mr. Sloane, he said, "These parties aren't speaking to me. They're not speaking to my problems, to my family's problems."

MR. RUSSERT: But you do see differences between Barack Obama and John McCain on the war, on tax cuts, on the environment, on a lot of issues?

MR. NADER: Yeah. There are differences, obviously. The question is not whether their differences verbally or what they put on their Web site, the question is what is their record? Senator Obama's record has not been a challenging one. He's not been a Senator Wellstone or Senator Abourezk or Senator Metzenbaum by any means. He has leaned, if anything, more toward the pro-corporate side of, of policymaking. The issue is, do they have the moral courage? Do they have the fortitude to stand up against the corporate powers and get things done? Yes, get things done for the American people?

1950, President Truman proposed universal health care. We still don't have it. We have the worst tax system, perverse incentives that rewards the speculators on Wall Street. Why aren't we taxing speculation on Wall Street instead of heavily taxing human labor and sales taxing necessities like food and appliances and furniture and clothing? There's no debate on this. William Hartung, the independent military analyst, wrote an article the other day saying there's no debate on the bloated military budget, on how best to defend this country without breaking the federal budget and putting huge deficits on the backs of our children and their grandchildren. We need to shift the power from the few to the many. And always in American history, every social justice movement was a shift of power from the few to the many. Maybe the slogan should be "Power to the babies."

MR. RUSSERT: On Wednesday it's your birthday. Happy birthday.

MR. NADER: Thank you.

MR. RUSSERT: You'll be 74 years old. You would be the oldest man ever elected president of the United States. You're older than John McCain.

MR. NADER: Thank you very much, Tim. I really like that.

MR. RUSSERT: It's an issue that has been discussed about John McCain, and I'm presenting it to you.

MR. NADER: First of all, I thought David Letterman was very unfair in the way he made fun of John McCain's age. Very, very--I mean, really overboard. I mean, humor has no limits, obviously. But second, someone once said the only true aging is the erosion of one's ideals, and I want the people out there just to look at our Web site and see how exciting it's going to be. I've been assured by my computer/Internet literate associates--I grew up in the Underwood typewriter age, you know--that this is going to be the most exciting, informative, participatory Web site of any presidential campaign, votenader.org. And on that Web site now, Tim, is a declaration that we will receive no money from commercial interests, no money from political action committees, only from individuals. And I'll take it from any individuals--Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, independent, Green party. And, and we are very frugal. They've labeled me Mr. Frugal, my, my associates. We know how to use it. None of this huge waste on political consultants who have really messed up Hillary Clinton's campaign.

MR. RUSSERT: You heard Barack Obama say that in many ways, you're a heroic figure. You were first on MEET THE PRESS in 1966, you said that you would never run for elective office back then. This is your third run for the presidency. Are you concerned now, when people look back at Ralph Nader, they'll consider him the Wendell Willkie of his generation, someone who kept running and running for president with no chance of winning, which will diminish the legacy that you tried to carve out as a consumer advocate.

MR. NADER: No, Tim. My concern doesn't proceed from that. I came to Washington over 40 years ago to help improve my country and, and started a lot of citizen groups who did that. That was a time you had a hearing in Congress, regulatory agencies like the Food and Drug Administration would be more responsive--Auto Safety Agency, EPA. That's a time Nixon, because he heard the rumble of the people, and he was the last president to really fear liberals enough to change his position, signed OSHA, signed EPA, had a health plan that he didn't really believe in, had a minimum income plan to abolish poverty, and then it started. Around 1979, the doors started closing on the citizen groups. So my concern, Tim, comes from, to give you statistics quickly, 58,000 workers who die every year from work-related diseases and trauma on the job; 65,000 people according to EPA who die from air pollution; over 100,000 people who die from adverse effects of medicines; 250 people a day who die from hospital-induced infections; and all the fraud, waste and abuse that's eating at the heart of the family budget, aggravating them. They can't get answers to their questions. They're thrown into huge debt. Now they're losing their houses while White House--while Wall Street speculators laugh all the way to the bank. That's where my concern comes from. And I hope it's shared by a lot of people around the country. I hope a lot of people will be gathered around the country to establish Congress watchdogs in every district, a thousand people--we want to hear from very congressional district--to show the American people how easy it is to turn the Congress around if people are organized. Fifteen hundred corporations get their way by--from a majority of 535 members of Congress. We're millions of people out there, and we simply have to, for the sake of our children and grandchildren, and the state of our nation in the world, we have to mobilize in that manner, and that's what that, that Web site is all about. It's not just a Web site. It's a gathering center, votenader.org.

MR. RUSSERT: Ralph Nader, we thank you very much for joining us, making your announcement and sharing your views.

MR. NADER: Thank you very much, Tim. Thank you.

MR. RUSSERT: Coming next, John McCain fights back against The New York Times. And Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, they debated Thursday, and they're getting ready to debate again this Tuesday in Cleveland, Ohio. Our roundtable is next--David Brooks, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Michele Norris, and Chuck Todd--only on MEET THE PRESS.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: Our MEET THE PRESS roundtable, David Brooks of The New York Times, presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, Michele Norris of NPR and Chuck Todd, NBC News. All after this station break.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: Welcome all. Let's go right to it. Here's the very latest NBC News elected delegate count. Obama, 1183; Clinton 1,031. That's 152 advantage for Obama. Superdelegates, it is Clinton, 257; Obama, 194; a 63 advantage for Clinton. But look at this. Since Super Tuesday, Barack Obama has gained 20 superdelegates, Hillary

Clinton has lost five. And a gain of five in two Sundays.

Look at this, contests won: Obama, 24--that includes 21 states, the Virgin Islands, District of Columbia and Democrats abroad--Clinton, 11 states. And if you add up all the votes they've gotten, Obama nearly a million more; 50-to-46.

Next stop, Ohio. Here's the latest poll from Ohio: Obama, 50--43; Clinton, 50. And in Texas it's Clinton, 48; Obama, 47.

Chuck Todd, what does Hillary Clinton have to do in Texas and Ohio in order to close, close this race in terms of delegates?

MR. CHUCK TODD: She'd have to do something impossible, which is win by some 15 or 20 points. I mean, I, I sort of crunched some numbers from March 4th to see if she, she can win three of the four states, she could win Texas 52-48, Ohio 52-48, Rhode Island 52-48, lose Vermont, say, 55-45, and she will net all of three delegates the--in that scenario, because there's a couple things working against her. First of all, this Texas primacaucus, whatever you want to call it, where two-thirds of the delegates are going to be distributed by statewide vote in the state Senate districts and then a third of the delegates are decided later that night in a caucus. Well, we've seen the Obama organizational advantage has been overwhelming in these caucuses. So he wins that probably 55-45, and that's being conservative on the caucus front. He will probably net more delegates out of Texas than she will, even if she wins by four points in the...

MR. RUSSERT: The popular vote.

MR. TODD: ...the popular vote. It is that, it is that much of a problem she's got on the delegate front.

MR. RUSSERT: So he would still be ahead by 150 delegates on the elected delegate count.

MR. TODD: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: And the superdelegates are frozen or moving towards Obama in terms of Clinton.

But their strategy is--the Clinton strategy--if they win Texas, if they win Ohio they have momentum to stay in the race, to try to go on to Philadelphia--Pennsylvania and some other states. It was Bill Clinton who said this Wednesday in Beaumont, Texas, let's watch:

(Videotape)

FMR. PRES. BILL CLINTON: If she wins in Texas and Ohio, I think she'll be the nominee. If you don't deliver for her, I don't think she can be. It's all on you.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: It's all on you, Michele Norris. Bill Clinton saying if she wins there, she can continue, even though she'd still be behind in elected delegates.

MS. MICHELE NORRIS: Yeah, and some of her other advisers are now saying similar things. I mean, it's, it's--you know, to add something to what Chuck said, the delegate math is very difficult not just because of the sort of Texas two-step in the primary, but also in the way that the delegates are apportioned. In the areas where the Clinton camp expects to run strong in Texas--in Travis County, in Harris County, in places where the delegates are allotted based on previous voting records--she's running hard after Hispanics because of the previous voting record there. She may do well in those areas, but it's not necessarily a net gain. So there's, there's great difficulties for her in, in Texas. And I think when, when you look at the numbers that you flashed up on the screen, it's not just those numbers, it's where those numbers were last week and where those numbers were two weeks ago. She had a, a strong advantage. It--she was well ahead of Barack Obama two weeks ago in Ohio; and you look at how those numbers are narrowing now, he's really closing in on her in both of those key states.

MR. RUSSERT: In both Ohio and Texas.

MS. NORRIS: Yes.

MR. RUSSERT: Let's show Hillary Clinton from the debate on Thursday, and then on the campaign trail yesterday. What a difference 48 hours makes. Let's watch.

(Videotape)

SEN. CLINTON: And you know, no, no matter what happens in this contest--and I am honored, I am honored to be here with Barack Obama. I am absolutely honored.

(End videotape)

(Videotape)

SEN. CLINTON: So shame on you, Barack Obama. It is time you ran a campaign consistent with your messages in public. That's what I expect from you. Meet me in Ohio. Let's have a debate about your tactics and your behavior in this campaign.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: What happened, Doris?

MS. DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN: Well, it seemed like at the debate she was taking the high road, given the realism of what Chuck and Michele just talked about and knowing that she didn't want to destroy the party by going into a fight for those superdelegates or for arguing about Florida and Michigan, where a lot of her own advisers are saying you cannot do that. You do that and you wind up like 1912, Teddy Roosevelt had the popular vote by far in every state where there were primaries, Taft had the party support behind him. They worried about credentials. In every credential fight, Taft won. Teddy was so angry he called "Theft! Thievery!" and he bolted the race. It destroyed the Republican Party for a generation, and the Democrat won. And you had the feeling on the debate night she was thinking about that, protecting the party.

And then the next morning they woke up, maybe they thought, "We still have a chance on this." And somehow going after Obama on this mailer in Ohio--which, as Chuck was pointing out earlier, it's really not so much even about the health care debate, but it was about NAFTA, and that was--be killing her in Ohio. But it seemed like a quick turnaround when, when she had been so honorable the day before.

MR. RUSSERT: At that same Cincinnati event, David Brooks, Hillary Clinton decided to compare Barack Obama to George W. Bush, suggesting both of them represented change that you didn't know much about. Here's her comparison of Bush-Obama. Let's watch.

(Videotape)

SEN. CLINTON: You know, people have talked a lot about change in this election. Well, we have lived through some of the worst change that anybody can imagine the last seven years. You know, when he ran for office, he promised change, didn't he? He promised change as a compassionate conservative, and the American people got shafted, and we're going to have to make up for all that we have lived through the last seven years. So, fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Fool me twice. George Bush and Barack Obama, simpatico.

MR. DAVID BROOKS: In the debate she was Emily Post, now she's Howard Beale. She's, she's furious, and she's not going to take it anymore. But this has been the problem with the campaign--no consistent message. And, and, and she's switched messages time and time again. And she can fight, and I sort of admire her for fighting. We're putting her in the rearview mirror maybe a little too quickly, but, but the problem with the campaign now is not delegates, it's morale. General Bradley said you don't win battles without morale. They don't have any high morale. Why should her staffers fight to the death for her, because they just feel it slipping away. He's got the audacity; he has a reason. His people, if they were in this position, they have a reason to think, "Hey, this--we must win. We must win." Her campaign has never had that. They, they would like her to win; they think she'd be a good president, but that "must win," they've never had that, and it--I think it shows inside the campaign.

MS. GOODWIN: That may be why she had to show anger, to show her emotion in fighting for it in these next couple weeks ahead.

MR. TODD: It's like an NBA ref when they take a technical for their--or an NBA coach when they take a technical for the team, to fire up the team.

MR. RUSSERT: But, Michele, what about comparing George W. Bush to Barack Obama? Will that convince Democratic voters? Will that sell? Will that resonate?

MS. NORRIS: You know, I think the word shame is difficult to use when both comparing Barack Obama to George Bush, but also you heard shame in both of those, those bites that you just heard. And if you're trying to motivate people, it's not clear that shame is the way to do that. I'm not--it, it--it's interesting that she's talking about--the conversation is entirely external as opposed to why you should vote for me. And I think, you know, in terms of the morale and finding a consistent message, if she's going to sell this, make that sell, close this deal with those voters, it seems that she would be in a position of trying to sell herself as opposed to pointing to past presidents or trying to make that kind of comparison.

MR. RUSSERT: MEET THE PRESS loves history, as you know. I--and I meant to say Harold Stassen with Ralph Nader, rather than Wendell Willkie, so my apologies to Mr. Willkie. Harold Stassen of the generation--who ran seven times for president. But the Clinton campaign meant to--tried to make an issue of Barack Obama borrowing words and phrases from Deval Patrick, now the governor of Massachusetts, the national co-chair of Obama's campaign. Let's watch the similarity between Obama and Patrick.

(Videotape, February 15, 2008)

SEN. OBAMA: Don't tell me words don't matter. "I have a dream." Just words? "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal." Just words? "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Just words?

(End videotape)

(Videotape, October 15, 2006)

MR. DEVAL PATRICK: "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal." Just words? Just words? "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Just words?

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Now the candidates were asked about that at the debate on Thursday. Here's now Senator Obama responded, then Senator Clinton.

(Videotape)

SEN. OBAMA: The notion that I had plagiarized from somebody who's one of my national co-chairs, who gave me the line and suggested that I use it, I think is silly. And, you know, but, but this is where we start getting into silly season in politics, and I think people start getting discouraged about it.

SEN. CLINTON: I think that if your candidacy is going to be about words, then they should be your own words. That's, I think, a very simple proposition. And, you know, you know, lifting whole passages from someone else's speeches is not change you can believe in, it's change you can Xerox. And I just don't think...

SEN. OBAMA: Come one. That's, that's not what happened, Hillary.

SEN. CLINTON: No, but Barack, it is because if, you know, if you look, if you look...

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: And a reaction from the audience there, Doris.

MS. GOODWIN: Yeah, well, I think when you give a canned line like that, people don't like it. You know, and I think what's going on here is that it's inevitable when candidates sit next to each other at debates, work with one another as Obama and, and Mr. Patrick had, you're going to pick up patterns from one another, you know, especially during these debates. They've all picked up language from one another. They're like an old couple that begins to look like each other at the end of their lives, and they've, they've probably listened to their colleagues on the debating trail more than they have their wives or their spouses. So in some ways it's good for the party to have the best lines that everybody in that party comes up with, the best ideas and patterns. Eventually one person will be the nominee. Let them evolve into each other as, as the time goes by, mush them all together.

MR. RUSSERT: It's funny you should say pick up lines from spouses or pick up lines from competitors, because I listened to Senator Clinton's closing remarks, and they sounded hauntingly familiar to me. And sure enough, we went back and checked, and this is what we discovered. Here's Senator Clinton and her husband, Bill Clinton, Senator Clinton and John Edwards. Let's watch.

(Videotape, February 21, 2008)

SEN. CLINTON: You know, the hits I've taken in life are nothing compared to what goes on every single day in the lives of people across our country.

(End videotape)

(Videotape, February 18, 1992)

FMR. PRES. CLINTON: The hits that I took in this election are nothing compared to the hits that the people of this state and this country are taking every day of their lives.

(End videotape)

(Videotape, February 21, 2008)

SEN. CLINTON: Whatever happens, we're going to be fine. You know, we have strong support from our families and our friends. I just hope that we'll be able to say the same thing about the American people, and that's what this election should be about.

(End videotape)

(Videotape, December 13, 2007)

FMR. SEN. JOHN EDWARDS: What's not at stake are any of us. All of us are going to be just fine, no matter what happens in this election. But what's at stake is whether America is going to be fine.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: David Brooks.

MR. BROOKS: You got to remember how the--how these people live. They are--first of all, they're insane people that want to run for president. Second of all, they've been talking--they're in--they've been talking constantly for two years and haven't really been listening. They have what I call loggeria dementia, which is talking so much you drive yourself insane. So they've just been grasping at everything, and they've had no time to read, no time to think. I mean, if Mitt Romney had to not borrow lines, his, his rallies would have been silent. So it would have been like Friends meetings or something like that. So I don't blame them. They just agglomerate everything they can use and hear and just shove it into their, into their speech.

MR. RUSSERT: But Chuck Todd, the Clinton campaign was out there waving the plagiarism flag when in fact it appears to be a very common tactic that all candidates use in terms of borrowing from husbands or from opponents or from friends.

MR. TODD: Well, it was about--it's about this character thing. Because if you really look at why Obama's beating Clinton, it's not on issues, it's on authenticity. He has sold himself as a more authentic person, a more authentic potential nominee. And I think the Clintons have felt any way they can undermine that authenticity, maybe he's a house of cards, maybe. You know, that--that's what they keep saying to themselves. There--they beat their head against the wall on this. They just don't understand how a guy who three years ago was in the Illinois state Senate is somehow beating them for their birthright, you know, this, this Democratic nomination. And so I think the hit on the quote/unquote "plagiarism charge" was trying to hit this authenticity. I mean, we've seen in our exit polls, he destroys her on that sort of honest, trustworthy, authenticity.

MS. NORRIS: I, I think, if I may say, it's also an invitation for him to step into the ring. Because they think if he takes a defensive position--if she strikes at him and he--if he, he strikes back, that she has an advantage there because she is better positioned to sort of be in that sort of warrior pose. That's something that he's not always comfortable. You started talking about this in an historical context. Eleanor Roosevelt said, "You cannot make me feel inferior without my consent."

MS. GOODWIN: Absolutely.

MS. NORRIS: If they're trying to embarrass him, one of the tacks he seems to have taken is, "You will not embarrass me without my consent. You may try to pull me here, but I'm going to stay right here."

MR. RUSSERT: You know, in history--on Super Tuesday, Hillary Clinton gave a speech: "I see an America where our economy works for everyone." Jimmy Carter, 32 years ago, "I see an America with a job for every man, woman and child." Bill Safire wrote about this in 1987, former speechwriter for Richard Nixon. He said, "I always admired Franklin Roosevelt's use of the repeated 'I see' construction. Working with writers Samuel Rosenman and Robert Sherwood in 1940, F.D.R. collaborated on a speech that used 'I see' to frame an inspiring vision: 'I see an America where factory workers are not discarded after they reach their prime. ... I see an America whose rivers and valleys and lakes ... are protected as the rightful heritage of all the people. ... I see an America devoted to our freedom.' Working as a speechwriter for Richard Nixon," "I thought: Why not lift it?" Sure enough, Nixon gave a speech saying, 'I see a day when Americans,' just like Carter, just like Clinton. So then, Safire acknowledges this: "After that speech, I felt a little pang of guilt..." "I called Sam Rosenman to fess up to using the 'I see' construction he and Bobby Sherwood had written for Roosevelt." And this is what Rosenman said, "'Check Robert Ingersoll'" "10 years after the Civil War." "I tracked down the speech. ...There was the source of F.D.R.'s 'I see' in an Ingersoll speech in '76. "'I see our country filled with happy homes. ... I see a world where thrones have crumbled. ... I see a world where labor reaps its full reward.'" This is Ingersoll who nominated Samuel Blaine for president in 1876. Rutherford B. Hayes won the nomination. Doris Kearns Goodwin, I see that politicians have a way of borrowing from one another.

MS. GOODWIN: Well, look, just as these politicians on the campaign trail are borrowing and absorbing patterns and evolving, so too speechwriters. They look at the best speeches in history. It's inevitable that those patterns are going to be get in their heads. And you know, we can't make too much of this. This is the spoken word. It's different from the written word, and it becomes part of what's in there. As you said, there's not that much in their

heads anymore that's coming in that's new. So all that's in there is what was there before.

MR. RUSSERT: Barack Obama has been criticized about rhetoric over substance. David Brooks, ask not what MEET THE PRESS can do for you, but what you can do for MEET THE PRESS. This is what you wrote in your column about Barack Obama having some fun with his status. "Up until now The Chosen One's [Obama's] speeches had seemed to them less like stretches of words and more like soul sensations that transcended time and space. But those in the grips of Obama Comedown Syndrome began to wonder if His stuff actually made sense. For example, His Hopeness tells rallies that we are the change we have been waiting for, but if we are the change that we have been waiting for then why have we been waiting since we've been here all along?"

MR. BROOKS: I was describing what I think is happening, and it's happened to me to some extent. You go to the rallies, you, you faint, you feel, you weep at your phone because you're watching the--his videos. And then you actually begin to think about them a little more, and you, you experience a little bit of a letdown, and you start to think. And I'm, I'm amazing that Hillary Clinton has not launched these attacks a little better. How is this 47-year-old guy--he'll be 47 if he's elected president--going to change all these 70-something polarized committee chairmen on the Hill? He's--there's been a lot of bipartisan things that have happened the last couple of years: the gang of 14 on judges, immigration, the FISA got--bill got 68 senators. He's been involved in none of them. So it's fair to ask, and she should do a little of this asking, "How exactly are you going to bring this unity about?" And you know, it's fair to ask these questions. It should be said that people who come down from the heights of Obama-mania still do seem to like him. They know it's going to be tough, they're realistic about it, but they think, "Hey, I share something with that guy, some sense of hope."

MS. GOODWIN: But, you know...

MR. BROOKS: And that can't be erased. That's still there.

MS. GOODWIN: ...what history argues, and I think this is what he's arguing, is that the only time we've seen progressive change in this country is when the country is mobilized to push the people in Congress to action. That's what happened in the Progressive Movement in the turn of the century, it's what happened in the New Deal, it's what happened in the '60s. And I think that's what he's arguing. That "I can't just get it down by myself; I need to have that movement out there that will push us in Washington, me and them included." And that's what I think is the strength of that message that he's trying to espouse.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me move to the Republicans. Big article in The New York Times on Thursday here is, "For McCain, Self-Confidence On Ethics Poses Its Own Risk." Talked about a potential romantic involvement, concern of the staff. Clark Hoyt, the public editor of The Times writes today his very strong criticism about that article. This was the exchange that Senator McCain had with Kelly O'Donnell of MEET THE PRESS after the article--of, of NBC after the article came out. Let's listen.

(Videotape)

KELLY O'DONNELL reporting:

Senator, did you ever have any meeting with any of your staffers in which they would've intervened to ask you not to see Vicki Iseman or to be concerned about appearances of being too close to a lobbyist?

SEN. JOHN McCAIN: No.

O'DONNELL: No meeting ever occurred?

SEN. McCAIN: No.

O'DONNELL: No staffer was ever concerned about a possible romantic relationship?

SEN. McCAIN: If they were, they didn't communicate that to me.

O'DONNELL: Did you ever have such a relationship?

SEN. McCAIN: No.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Michele Norris, it seemed that by the end of the day that McCain had campaigned it successfully, pushed back at The Times on the--that whole notion of a personal involvement, but the issue of lobbyists around the anti-lobby senator continued to percolate.

MS. NORRIS: And, and well continued to percolate. I mean, this is a story that will live on through several news cycles, in part because of, in his explanation, he seems to have made statements that other reporters have already, you know, found to be untrue or not completely true. In The Times piece, you know, and, as you said, Hoyt did a

strong--almost a strong rebuke in the paper today under the headline "What the McCain Article Did Not Say." However, what it did say has left almost a trail of bread crumbs for every other investigative reporter in, you know, in Washington and Arizona and, and every place in between, to look closely at his record. So he's pushed back strong at The Times and may have helped him within his party, you know, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." some of the conservatives who have questions about him, you know, they may have problems with John McCain, but they have much bigger problems with The New York Times, so he may have won some support there. But it's a story that will live on for weeks and maybe even months, dog him all the way through November potentially.

MR. RUSSERT: Chuck Todd.

MR. TODD: Well, you know, John McCain has a bigger problem. I mean, yes, I think he successfully won this battle. But he's got a bigger problem in what's coming, potentially coming at him. If Barack Obama wraps up this nomination on March 4th, he is going to be facing a financial juggernaut that he's not ready for. They are having some problems raising money, even as the presumptive Republican nominee now. A story like this actually slows down the big donor donations for a little bit because you're, you're frozen in time a little bit, you're having to fight this battle over here. If--this, this time between, say, March 5th and the convention, could be a very dangerous time for John McCain. If Barack Obama's raising 40 to 50 million dollars a month now, what's he going to raise if he actually is the Democratic nominee? What's that going to mean for television advertising? You know, this--he won this battle, but I think John McCain is facing a much bigger problem. He need--nobody needs Hillary Clinton to do well on March 4th more than John McCain because he, he's, he's facing a freight train coming at him in Barack Obama.

MR. RUSSERT: In 1996, Bill Clinton and the Democratic National Party spent a lot of money early on in the summer to frame the issues against Bob Dole, to define Bob Dole, and Dole never dug back out of that hole.

MS. GOODWIN: Just to pick up, though, on what Michele said about the enemy of my enemy is my friend, you know that in the decades before World War II, Winston Churchill thought that Soviet Russia was his greatest enemy. Then Hitler came along as an even more powerful enemy. And when Hitler invaded Russia, Russia became his friend, and he explained, he said, "And now"--he said, "If Hitler invaded hell, I'd have a nice word or two to say about the devil in the House of Commons." But I think the serious thing that happened is just this change in relationship between the candidates and the reporters has been such a sea change. In 1920, the reporters knew in detail that Warren Harding was having an affair for 15 years. They thought it wasn't their business to talk about the private life, compared to a front-page article that suspects an affair on the part of some aides. In fact, the Republican committee was so worried about this affair that they actually gave the woman \$20,000 and sent her to the Orient during the entire campaign to get her out of the way. So we've changed the whole notion of what part of a private life matters. When the real story is what part of the public life matters.

And that's where you're right, that I think if this is going to talk about some problems with propriety and appearance on a public level from McCain, that's the real issue, more important than the potential titillation of the sex...

MR. BROOKS: But...

MS. GOODWIN: ...that may or may not have been there.

MR. BROOKS: My problem is, you know, Obama went after McCain on having lobbyists on the bus. And, and that may or may not be true. It is true. Charlie Black's a lobbyist; Rick Davis, his manager's a lobbyist. But the guy has a record. Obama has a fine record on ethics, but John McCain has a record for 23 years. Every year he goes to the floor of the Senate and makes fun of the earmarks that lobbyists have produced, and his colleagues take a little piece of skin out of his back for, for ridiculing them. He tackled Jack Abramoff, even though it made the Republican Party very uncomfortable. He tackled Boeing. He was chairman of the Commerce Committee. Suppose he did write these letters for Paxon, which he may have. I don't, I don't really understand the case. The Commerce Committee is one of the most lobbied committees on Capitol Hill. If he only wrote two letters out of all that time, that means he was batting 99 percent. And I'd hate to think that Barack Obama is just going to cherry pick the--a few things and not look at the whole record. It seems to me McCain has a pretty good case on this issue, as someone who's been pretty tough on lobbyists over the course of his career.

MR. RUSSERT: But there will be references to the Keating Five, which he was part of. There will be references to those letters, which he did write. There will be references to money from people who have business before the committee donating to the campaign. It's going to happen.

MR. BROOKS: No, obviously, it's fair, it's fair commentary. I guess my point would be, if somebody aims at purity and then hits 95 percent, do we--how much do we fault them in a world in which a lot of members of the Senate, frankly, are hitting 25 percent, and are wholly-owned subsidiaries of lobbyists.

MR. RUSSERT: You did write that if John McCain is publicly contradicted or challenged in any of his comments regarding his news conference, it would be fatal for his campaign.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. I think--I, I was struck by the, the--by the tone of that conference. It was total--it was--as a friend of mine said, he went all in. If they can produce evidence of an affair, then that no which he gave to Kelly O'Donnell, that's it. Because he was pretty definite. And I assume he's not stupid. He wouldn't have said it that bluntly. He could have said about the meeting, about, about the relationship, I don't remember. He didn't say that. He said no.

MR. RUSSERT: You don't think that's right?

MS. GOODWIN: That if the affair comes out that it'll be a big deal? I think to some extent, the country has moved beyond it. After the impeachment went so far out of proportion to Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, it seems like the country is now saying, "What we really care about is public leadership, not their private behavior." Otherwise, who's going to run for public office if they're going to feel like their private life is absolutely out in the open on everything? And I think the public's ahead of the reporters on this issue.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me show you the latest public polls, a hotline in Fox News. McCain, Clinton first, here's the matchup. We have McCain ahead of Clinton 48-40, and 47-44. The same matchup with McCain and Obama, Obama is ahead on one, 48-40 and ahead 47-43. Michele, do you think the Obama people will be producing those polls for the superdelegates, saying "Hey, this is who's the strongest candidate"?

MS. NORRIS: I think they're already produced those polls.

MR. RUSSERT: They've already done it.

MS. NORRIS: Yeah, they've already done it. And the, and the candidate himself is making that case. I mean, he's saying the polls show that in a head-to-head matchup, I'm the candidate that does best against John McCain. So they're already making that argument and, you know, those calls to the superdelegates. I mean, there, there are some people who've gone underground. There are stories about people who've already changed their phone numbers, who put the, the phone in the kitchen drawer somewhere because they just don't want to take the calls anymore.

MR. RUSSERT: The whole issue of national security, John McCain basis his career on that issue. Barack Obama made this comment at the debate, how he would go after John McCain on that central issue. Let's listen.

(Videotape)

SEN. OBAMA: And I think that when we're having a debate with John McCain, it is going to be much easier for the candidate who was opposed to the concept of invading Iraq in the first place to have a debate about the wisdom of that decision.

(End videotape)

MR. RUSSERT: Does that work?

MR. TODD: You know, it was his best foreign policy answer I think that he'd given to date. He finally answered the commanding--you know, that goes back to the whole point of that debate that was shocking. I, I think the beginning of that was a question that Hillary Clinton asking whether Barack Obama was ready to be commander in chief. She ducked the question, which seemed to think, you know, imagine had she said, "No, he's not ready." John McCain would have uttered that line a million times between now and the November election. He--she didn't do it. He decided to take the question and say, "Not only am I qualified, I'm better qualified than she is to go after McCain." It, it is showing that he is growing as a candidate, that he is getting better and he might be ready for this matchup. And frankly, you know, this 25-year age difference between Obama and McCain, that may be the most striking thing after all. The only thing John McCain better be--is thankful for, I think, is that the election isn't held on a week-to-week basis, and there aren't these back-to-back speeches that you would see every night between Obama. And these Tuesday nights have not been good for John McCain of, of late.

MR. RUSSERT: David Brooks, Barack Obama also saying, "My most important decision, judgment as a commander in chief was I was against the war; Hillary was for it, McCain was for it. That shows I could be a very good and effective commander in chief."

MR. BROOKS: Right. And if the, if the verdict on foreign policy is about that, then, then Obama'll win. McCain'll try to shift it and say, "Hey, what about the, what about the surge? There were two decisions here. There was one decision before the war, but there was another decision when we were in the pits, and I was the one driving the decision. It's produced some tremendous security benefits. It's beginning to produce some political benefits. He was on the wrong side of that." He'll try to change that. I think it'll all come down to how threatened do the American public feel? If they feel threatened by things abroad, then he is the safe choice. If they want to move beyond that and look at domestic issues, then Obama's going to win.

MR. RUSSERT: You have five seconds, historian. Have you ever seen a race like this?

MS. GOODWIN: I love it. It's the best. No, you know, and it's exciting because people are involved with--we've been worrying for years about the fact that nobody's paying attention anymore, that it's a--you know, it's not a participant sport, that the declining polls are going down. People are going to the voting booths; people are excited. How can you not love it?

MR. RUSSERT: Doris, David, Michele, Chuck, thanks very much. We'll be right back.

(Announcements)

MR. RUSSERT: That's all for today. Watch MSNBC Tuesday night, Clinton vs. Obama. They debate live in Cleveland at 9 p.m. on MSNBC, and we will be there.

And we'll be back next week. If it's Sunday, it is MEET THE PRESS.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23319215/>

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)

© 2008 MSNBC.com