

An Ode to *Meet the Press*

(With Some Observations About Ohio)

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I watch *Meet the Press* every Sunday morning, you could say religiously.

I like virtually everything about the show. I love the theme song. It's so anxiety producing that it snaps you out of any lingering sense of well-being that might be left over from Saturday night. The music instantaneously communicates that there is a big, bad world out there and you damned well better be informed about it. Of course, just knowing about it won't help you very much, if at all. But I kind of enjoy the musical "call to arms." If nothing else, it gets me to sit up straight and secretly wish I had paid more attention in Social Studies.

After the overture and an urgent-sounding voiceover about the subjects the show will cover, Tim Russert appears on the screen. I always find this moment a little agonizing because Russert, who is kind of roly-poly, is really cast against type. Though obviously bright and terrifically well prepared for the show, he's almost too cherubic looking for the part he plays. Invariably, though, he makes up for that by being a bulldoggish sonofabitch during his interviews, as if there's something truly important about catching a political functionary in a contradiction: *Six months ago you said X. Now you're saying Y. Which is it?* Most ordinary Americans accept contradictions as a kind of building block – the material of life. Not Russert. He's on a one-man crusade to rid the planet of this blight.

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Another thing I like about *Meet the Press* is the commercials. They promote a full range of information-age and financial consulting products, all of which are totally foreign to me. One Sunday I watched the show and the only advertised product whose function I could identify was the drug Cialis.

Cialis, apparently, is a much improved version of Viagra. It works over a longer period of time, so the user doesn't have to interrupt lovemaking to pop a pill. That seems useful because a male partner can give more energy to the wooing, or to being wooed, as the case may be. But what really gets me about the Cialis commercial is the voiceover warning: *If erection lasts for more than four hours, call your doctor.* Now I'm not a man, but I think I'd pick up the phone after the first hour and a half. Then again, what do I know?

I digress. Because, believe it or not, this essay is not about erections; it's about elections. (I never noticed that these words are nearly identical until I wrote this essay.) Let me return to *Meet the Press* to set the stage.

Throughout 2004, the punditocracy covered the presidential election as if it were the Super Bowl. Russert, who seems to love the Buffalo Bills more than life itself, varied his own coverage, going from informed and aggressive interviews with the president, the presidential candidates and assorted surrogates to a sportscaster-like rundown of “what it's all going to come down to.” I remember well the Sunday morning when Russert took out his little blackboard (actually it was white and laminated) and wrote the word “Ohio” on it. Like a bookie calculating the odds for a major sporting event, Russert named Ohio – with its 20 electoral votes – as the state that would decide the next president of the United States. This is vintage *Meet the Press*. It's as if all the world's turmoil and angst – war, hunger, poverty, disease – can be reduced to a handheld laminated slate with a four-letter word and a magic number scrawled on it.

But let's give credit where credit is due. Ohio *did* turn out to be what it all came down to. Russert had it right. Both sides pulled out all the stops, but George Bush carried the state by 136,483 votes and thereby clinched a second term in the White House.



In “Who Lost Ohio?” – published in the *New York Times Magazine* on November 21, 2004 – the author, Matt Bai, presented a highly detailed and insightful analysis of the Democratic Party’s failure to win the presidency. Bai had spent the final 24 hours of the campaign in Ohio inside the Democrats’ major vote-pulling operations, conducted under the auspices of Americans Coming Together (ACT), one of the infamous 527s that the Kerry campaign hoped would mobilize the party’s core constituencies to the max. They succeeded in meeting their targets for mobilization, but as Bai pointed out: “...the truth was that the Bush campaign had created an entirely new math in Ohio.” ACT moved its operations out of the contested counties, Bai wrote, “and away from the business of trying to convert undecided voters. In the end, these were the voters Kerry needed.”

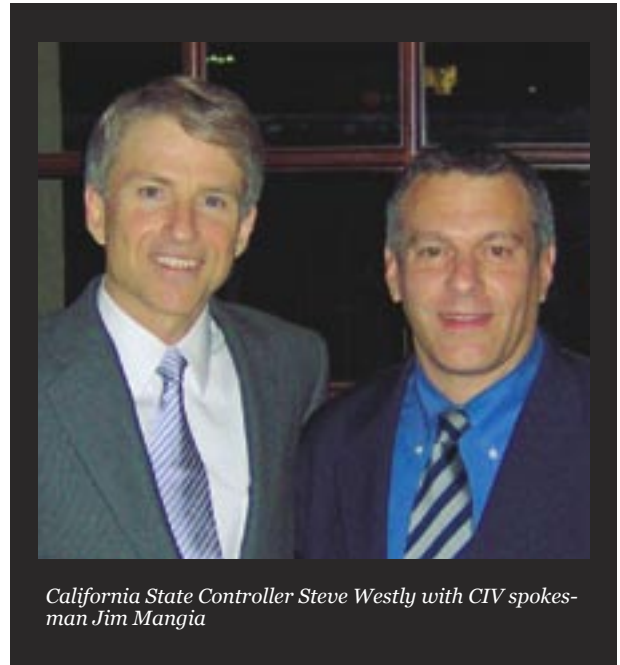
Who were those undecideds? Not surprisingly, many were independents. Indeed, Ohio is full of them. Nearly 5.5 million voters cast ballots in the 2004 presidential election; 25% of them, according to Voter News Service exit polls, were independents. Independents are notoriously “late deciders,” in part by definition. They do not hew to a party line, and they prefer to watch the campaign and the candidates develop along the way.

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In 1992 independent presidential candidate Ross Perot polled over one million votes in Ohio – 21% of the total and two points above the national average. When Perot ran a second time, in 1996, he dropped to a national average of 8.5% of the vote but polled 11% in Ohio. In 2000, Ralph Nader and lesser known independents polled a total of 168,007 votes (4%) in the Buckeye State – more than the difference between Bush and Kerry there in 2004.

Kerry needed an explicit strategy – not simply to mobilize the Democratic base (which he managed to do), but to connect it to an “up for grabs” constituency. Ohio has a Republican governor and two Republican senators.

As Bai suggested, the GOP was busy changing the math. The Kerry campaign, meanwhile, was stubbornly sticking to the traditional Democratic Party script. Far from investing in connecting to Ohio’s independents, the campaign never found its independent voice. Quite the contrary. First it launched an aggressive and ultimately successful effort to remove Nader from the Ohio ballot. Calculating that Nader’s removal nullified his potential “spoiler” effect, the Democrats were notoriously blind to the negative effect such a highly publicized anti-independent move (it made the front pages of Ohio’s major dailies) would have on independent voters – who were, generally speaking,



California State Controller Steve Westly with CIV spokesman Jim Mangia

leaning toward Kerry. According to VNS exit surveys, Kerry polled 57% among independents on Election Day (to 40% for Bush), but was unable to drill down to harder-core independents who could easily have put him over the top.

“Kerry made a fatal error,” says Fred Newman, a key architect of the independent political movement who managed the campaigns that placed independent presidential candidates on the Ohio ballot in 1984, 1988 and 1992. “Instead of throwing Nader off the ballot, Kerry should have reached out to Nader and to those of us with on-the-ground experience in mobilizing independent voters who vote as independents and not simply as swing voters. Kerry should have taken \$10 million of the infamous \$14 million that remained in his bank account and come to us,” Newman continues. “He should have said: *I will support your program for nonpartisan political reform. I want to reach out beyond the borders of the Democratic Party and craft a Democratic/independent coalition. If you help me to get elected I guarantee that you will have open access to the White House and that independent voters will get the political recognition they deserve.* If Kerry and Edwards had been smart enough to do that, they’d be sitting in the White House today,” Newman asserts.



Douglas Schoen (left) and Fred Newman with the author at “The Power of Fusion” conference, January 2005

That the Democrats failed to go beyond boundaries, to look past the narrow partisan paradigm, is of concern to social commentators like Matt Bai. I talked with Bai after the election and he told me: “There’s just a huge sector of voters out there, a huge number of voters, who have been waiting in vain for someone genuine, for someone to put the country’s interests above party – for some genuine leadership.”

In Bai’s view, the need to “build out” on a national scale is most pressing for the Democrats: “There’s still a strong dissatisfaction among a large number of voters with the current process and a strong desire for leadership that goes beyond...party loyalty. The more both parties disregard that and say ‘No, no...It’s all about our base’ the larger that demand gets. And if I’m a Democratic leader today, this would be of serious concern to me...The Republicans aren’t in danger of being supplanted by some alternative political movement. They’re doing just fine on the local level...There’s not a state in the country where Republicans can’t mount a competitive election today...But you look at the Democrats and there are huge swathes of the country where [they] are not competitive and are becoming less competitive.”

“It was really only three highly contested states — Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania — where independents strongly supported Kerry over Bush,” says political consultant and pollster Douglas Schoen, a partner in the political consulting firm of Penn, Schoen and Berland who has worked with many Democratic candidates and officeholders, including former President Bill Clinton. “But I think... we can say that the independent vote was probably the largest single voter bloc in America whose influence was systematically under-discussed, under-considered and under-analyzed.”

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Matt Bai

California State Controller Steve Westly, a lifelong Democrat, supported last year’s effort to pass Proposition 62 – an initiative for nonpartisan state and congressional elections – for some of the reasons Bai cites. “There is clearly gridlock in Sacramento and the level of partisan rancor is out of control,” Westly told *Neo-Independent* contributing editor Jim Mangia, a spokesman for California’s Committee for an Independent Voice (CIV), which supported Prop 62. “Look, I am a Democrat and proud to be a Democrat. I think there is a purpose for political parties. But at the end of the day, we are elected to get things done. The state has big problems, and we need to spend more time focusing on those. The sad thing today is we are not having truly democratic elections,” said Westly, among a small group of his party’s leaders who backed Prop 62 over the protests of the Democrat-controlled state legislature.

“When I grew up...it was the time of the Cold War,” Westly explained. “We looked at the Soviet Union and they had these ‘faux’ elections which members of the Supreme Soviet always won. There was a vote, but there were not real elections. We all felt very sad for these people and wondered why the public put up with it. But fast forward 30 years: we have a legislature of 120 members, 80 in the Assembly and 40 in the Senate, and no more than five elections in this whole group will be decided by margins of less than 10%. These are not real elections. We do not have real participatory democracy. This is why we need to have an open primary.”

The open primary measure — a reform that would have brought California’s three million independent voters into the decisive first round and helped to make independents a more powerful force — was defeated in 2004. Westly backed the reform because he believes that the presence of independent voters early in the process would exert a moderating influence on the parties. Fred Newman, however, sees independents not as a moderating force but as a radicalizing one:

If there’s a single thing that distinguishes independent voters from other American voters it’s their idea that something is wrong with the political *process*. The more independents come together as a unified

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political force and use their power to win key political reforms, the more the Democrats and Republicans will be forced to relinquish some of their control over the political scene. That’s a radical agenda. It’s what the American Revolution was fought over, after all. That was a political reform movement! Today the major parties are caught in a contradiction. If the Democrats, for example, want to win nationally they need the support of independents. To get it, they will have to empower them, but doing so will change the chemistry of American politics – and make it less predictable and controllable.

Schoen believes that the current partisan divide increases the leverage that independents have. “The even divisions of independents between Democrats and Republicans in terms of presidential preference gives you strong leverage to impact on the ongoing dialogue in America,” he explains. “That being said, I think it’s absolutely the case that political organizations in key swing states can make independent voters kingmakers on Election Day, in local and national elections.

In the not-too-distant future, perhaps even by 2008, the 35% of Americans who have not aligned with any political party could be pivotal. I’ll keep watching *Meet the Press*. Maybe, one day soon, I’ll tune in and Russert will hold up his little white board. But instead of naming a state, it will have a 12-letter word scrawled on it. I-N-D-E-P-E-N-D-E-N-T-S. And he’ll say, beaming like an oddsmaker at the Super Bowl, “It will all come down to this.” NEO-

