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Thank you all for inviting to be here today. It's wonderful to visit Berlin and to be a part of this discussion. I'd like to take some time today to discuss my experience in politics and the 2016 election.

Secretary Clinton, who was considered one of the most formidable Presidential candidates in history, has spent the last six months mired in controversy about her email server, and in some polls is losing to a 74-year-old socialist named Bernie Sanders.

Jeb Bush, the son and brother of two American Presidents, launched his campaign as the frontrunner with promises to shock and awe the party establishment and has since languished in the polls and has seemingly been unable to gain traction. Instead, the Republican Party – and the media - has fallen in love with an abrasive, reality-TV carnival barker turned candidate named Donald Trump, who routinely makes claims so offensive, wrong and absurd that the media has all but given up on fact checking him.

This has left many people in America and around the world wondering – what the hell is going on in American politics?

How have the candidates everyone was so sure were going to win struggled so badly? How has the discourse devolved so quickly, and who is going to actually win this election and clean up the mess when it's over?

I'm not sure that those questions are necessarily answerable, but I'll do my best to offer my perspective on the current state of the 2016 Presidential campaign and how to make sense of what's happened so far.

Let me start by telling you a little bit about myself and my time working for President Obama, and how that informs my thinking about this election.

I started working for President Obama in 2004 on his US Senate campaign. I was the youngest spokesman in the press office, which was at the time was being run by David Axelrod, who was Obama's friend and top strategist for many years, and Robert Gibbs, who went on to be President Obama's first White House Press Secretary.

Then state Senator Obama was incredibly well respected in Illinois and viewed as a brilliant young politician who was

uniquely capable of working across the aisle to get things done. Many people thought he could even make a great governor some day if he played his cards right.

He won a wild, crowded Senate primary after details about the millionaire frontrunner's messy divorce became public, and shortly thereafter the man who was likely to be his toughest Republican opponent dropped out of the race after it was reported that he tried to take his wife to sex clubs.

You can say a lot of bad things about Illinois politics, but they're certainly not boring. Additionally, it was becoming clear that Obama possessed a very important quality in politics – good luck.

I too was lucky enough to start working for Senator Obama a couple months before the 2004 Democratic National Convention. I still remember the excitement in the office the day Senator Kerry picked him to deliver the keynote address, and reading the speech drafts the President would send around at three in the morning from a hotel room in Peoria or some other small town after a long day of campaigning. That speech launched him onto the national stage, and well before

he was elected to the US Senate people began talking about whether he could be the first African American president.

Obama easily won his Senate race, and I spent the next two years working in his Washington, DC office as his press secretary. Obama did his best to focus on local issues that really mattered to his constituents, and as a result I spent countless hours talking to reporters about his efforts to prevent kids from getting lead paint poisoning in downstate Illinois or calling Obama at 6am to patch him into radio interviews in Chicago.

But despite his efforts to focus on his home state, it didn't take long for Democrats across the country to start loudly encouraging him to run. In many ways, the stars were aligned. His principled stance against the Iraq war set him apart from the other major candidates, and his inspirational story breathed life into a party that was beaten down after eight years of George Bush.

When Obama told us he was going to announce his candidacy, I signed up to be his Iowa spokesman. Iowa is the first state that

gets to vote in our process, and thus has a major impact in deciding who the nominee ultimately becomes.

The US Presidential primary process is in some ways archaic, quirky, and illogical, but in other ways it's the best possible way to test and prepare candidates for a job that no one is ready for unless they've done it before..

Democrats who compete in the Iowa caucuses have to convince their supporters not just to show up to a polling location and vote, but to spend hours at a caucus location on freezing winter night and literally stand in their corner. Candidates have to meet a certain threshold of support in each caucus location to be considered viable and have their votes count. If you're not viable, your voters can change their minds and support their second choice, so it's critical not to be too negative or completely turn off your opponents' supporters before Iowa.

Like I said, it's a bizarre, confusing process, but Iowa voters also happen to be some of the most informed and engaged citizens that I've ever met, which is a good thing since it's the most important state in the process. I went to hundreds of campaign events with the President in nearly seventy plus

counties, and heard farmers ask him difficult, detailed questions about the Patriot Act, or minute details of healthcare policy. It makes the candidates better and, at least until this year, it helps make clear which candidates are qualified to lead and which ones are not.

After Iowa, I worked in President Obama's national headquarters as a rapid response spokesman. That job involved working to defend the President and Vice President against attacks, constantly working the press to highlight contradictions between the rhetoric and record of his opponents.

Living and breathing that Presidential campaign taught me invaluable lessons about the US political process. Some were inspiring, like the basic fact that ordinary citizens get to question, criticize and sometimes inspire candidates, and can change the course of an election. One great example is a woman named Edith Childs. Obama met her on a gloomy day in South Carolina when he was in a foul mood and everything felt like it was going wrong. At the end of his event, she started chanting Fired Up, Ready to Go, which ultimately became the rallying cry for the entire campaign.

Some of the lessons were not so inspiring, and made me feel more cynical about politics. In particular, I grew deeply frustrated with the way the media and the public can be distracted by trivial issues, like how a candidate looks, or a slip of the tongue that gets taken out of context and distorted, while the key issues of the day are barely discussed.

As you all know, Obama won that historic election overwhelmingly, and was lucky enough to start working in White House press office on the first day of the administration as an assistant Press Secretary, and was later promoted to be the President's national security spokesman. My job was to try to help the press, and the public, understand the President's views on national security matters. The job was at times exhilarating, like the hours I spent in the White House situation room the day Osama bin Laden was killed, and at times infuriating, like the months I spent responding to shameful attempts to exploit the death of four Americans who were killed in Benghazi. But it was always fascinating, and I will always be extraordinarily grateful for the opportunity to watch those historic moments unfold.

I left the White House in March of 2013, but during that time from when I was first hired on the President's Senate campaign until today I learned a lot about how government works, the minutia of foreign policy, and the press, but I also took away some bigger lessons about the mood of the American public that I think can help explain why the 2016 election season has unfolded in such a bizarre way.

The first, and I think most significant factor, is the American people's **declining faith in institutions**. This includes the executive branch, financial institutions, congress and the media.

There are many legitimate and understandable reasons for this erosion. People are furious that the financial crisis wiped out the savings of hundreds of millions of people and crippled our economy for years, and yet most of the rich and powerful people who were responsible for creating it received no punishment.

The disclosures by Edward Snowden shocked many and concerned many Americans when they learned about the size and capabilities of our intelligence agencies. In particular, the

disclosure about the collection of telephone metadata and emails of American citizens were at odds with some public statements by senior US officials. The complex, technical nature of these intelligence programs, along with statements by government officials that were in some cases just wrong, led to confusion and concern that the government was listening to everything we say.

They also feel like Congress doesn't represent them and are more concerned about getting reelected than passing laws that will help people. A recent Gallup poll showed that only 8% of the country has either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Congress. Eight percent.

Trust in the media isn't much better. This, along with the shift away from network news and major newspapers, more and more Americans are seeking out news sources that deliver them information that primarily fits into their pre-established worldview. It is by no means a new phenomenon to have news outlets with a strong political point of view, but what is troubling is the growth of cable news networks and online publications that present a completely distorted sense of reality. If you watch only Fox News, it's in some ways

understandable that you might still question President Obama's country of birth, or religion, or think that the Affordable Care Act – legislation designed to give tens of millions of Americans healthcare for the first time – might actually include “death panels” of bureaucrats who get to decide who lives and dies. Because no matter how many times these lies are debunked, “questions” still find their way back on air. Similarly, if you watch read certain liberal news outlets, you're likely to be convinced by constant screeds accusing all Republicans of acting in bad faith. Very little room is left for principled disagreement, or honest debate. And even charges that seem absurd at first can start to sound plausible when they're repeated enough.

That media phenomenon has helped contribute to my second observation, which is more **extreme polarization of the country**. The US has a term called gerrymandering. Gerrymandering occurs when congressional districts are drawn in such a way to ensure that one party will win.

This means that members of Congress are no longer worried about winning an election against the other party, but instead are worried about having a primary opponent from within

their own party. As a result, compromise is viewed as political suicide, candidates are taking even more extreme positions to excite their base, and the most extreme factions of the Republican party are joining together in an effort to pull the party and the country to the right and regularly advocating measures like shutting down the US government. It's gotten so bad that the Speaker of the House, John Boehner, decided to quit, and they so far can't find anyone willing to take the job because everyone knows that the next person will have the same problems.

This has left the Republican Party fractured and weakened, and frankly that's bad for the country and for Democrats. DC elites often long for the days when Ronald Reagan and Democratic Speaker Tip O'Neil would cut deals over drinks in the Oval Office. And then they blame Obama for not having created the same kinds of relationships with this speaker. This gauzy nostalgia is overly simplistic and eye-rolling.

I will admit that schmoozing Congress is far from Obama's favorite activity, but the criticism ignores the fact that Obama and Boehner actually do have a good relationship. They do like each other. The problem, as evidenced by Speaker Boehner's

recent resignation, is that Boehner couldn't control his own caucus. No amount of golf games, invitations to social events or rides on Air Force One could convince the most extreme members of the GOP to compromise with Obama. Tapping into rightwing anger has become the lifeblood of their party.

Which leads to my final observation, which in some ways is the biggest challenge going forward, the **gutting of our campaign finance laws**. In 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on a case now commonly referred to as Citizens United, which essentially tossed out a ban on corporations or unions spending unlimited amounts of money in elections on things like attack ads or direct mail. The only restriction is that they don't give the money to the campaigns directly, instead they set up what are called Super PACs.

These super-PACs are by law supposed to be independent from the campaigns themselves, but in practice that's not the case. Candidates are allowed to help Super PACs raise money, and it's easy enough to informally coordinate campaign activities based on publicly available information.

So that's my sense of some of the major challenges and trends we're seeing in the US political system, which brings us to where we are today. The Republican campaign continues to be dominated by Donald Trump, who has literally spent more money on hats than almost anything else, but who has been propped up by an angry electorate that likes his no apologies, bloviating style, and by the media which knows he is good for ratings even if he is completely lacking in substance.

A number of candidates are vying to be the alternative to Trump, including Ben Carson, who frankly says even crazier things than Trump on a regular basis, along with more establishment candidates like Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz.

Except for Donald Trump, who is himself a billionaire, all of these candidates have had to search for their own billionaire to help prop up their campaigns by creating a super PAC, thanks to the Citizens United ruling we discussed earlier. The press gleefully reports on who is winning these courtships battles, as if it's ok to have candidates seeking out sugar daddies to finance their campaigns and we should just accept it.

Just the other day, a US outlet called Politico reported that right-wing billionaire Sheldon Adelson was warming to Senator Marco Rubio, in part because he had promised to reorder U.S. foreign policy in the middle east. Think about that for a second. A candidate made a bunch of foreign policy promises in exchange for financial backing, and somehow that's written up as a political coup -- not as an example of the corrupting influence of money in politics.

On the Democratic side, the race has been considerably less interesting. There has been a lot of handwringing about whether or not Vice President Biden will get into the race, but every day that goes by makes it more difficult. In the interim, Secretary Clinton has struggled to deal with a controversy over why she used a private email server instead of her government account. It has been enormously distracting and damaging to her campaign, but her performance in the first Democratic debate reminded people how good a candidate she can be, and while Bernie Sanders has garnered a shocking amount of support early, it's difficult to know whether he can sustain his momentum.

It's important to remember that polling at this stage of an election is almost completely irrelevant. On this day in 2007, an average of all the polls showed Clinton with 47.5% and Obama with 21.7%. I remember sitting in meetings in Iowa in August before the caucuses and hearing from our pollster that we were actually in fourth place in the Des Moines media market – even Bill Richardson was meeting us.

Until the votes start being counted, any election can change over night.

Little developments and events still feel enormous and get reported breathlessly. I'll never forget the day we lost the endorsement of Iowa's biggest newspaper, *The Des Moines Register*, to Secretary Clinton. President Obama was literally consoling *me* on the campaign bus because I was so distraught.

But just because early polling is meaningless doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention. I think sometimes we too easily dismiss campaign rhetoric as candidates just saying what they need to say to get elected, but that was not my experience with President Obama. Whether or not you supported him, it's clear

that a lot of what he's accomplished are proposals he made during the campaign.

Obama promised to end the war in Iraq, and refocus our attention on Afghanistan and hunt down Osama bin Laden. He promised to pass comprehensive healthcare legislation and get tens of millions of Americans health insurance. He promised he would be willing to talk with nations considered enemies, and now we've all but restored relations with Cuba and brokered a deal to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

Not every promise has been kept. I know he is enormously frustrated that GITMO is still open, and that he has not been able to create a less partisan and toxic atmosphere in Washington, but there's still time.

So those are some of my observations from my time in politics. I'd be happy to try and answer your political questions, or if you'd prefer to discuss foreign policy I'd be happy to discuss my time on the National Security Council, too.

Thank you.