

DAVID: I really want to welcome all of you to this event. We're enormously pleased and proud. The Kennedy School, as you know, is Harvard's institution that focused on creating leaders for public service and being a source that's both generating and collecting the powerful ideas that we hope can make a difference. And so this kind of event at such an extraordinary time where I think people on all sides of this election feel like it's one of the most important in a generation, it's especially important and exciting to be a part of this.

I first of all want to thank the remarkable group of panelists that are joining us. We're going to start the panel after lunch, or after brunch here, don't worry. And I also in particular want to thank Walter Shorenstein for his vision and generosity and his real remarkable insight that perhaps the best way to honor his daughter Joan would be with a center that could really focus on the power and importance of the press in politics and how these things interact. And, again, never an election perhaps where this is more important than right now.

So I just want to thank all of you for coming and turn it over to Walter who will also say just a couple of words and then we'll have brunch.

[APPLAUSE]

WALTER SHORENSTEIN: Thank you, David, I'm delighted to participate in all the activities of the Kennedy School and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. And I'm pleased to welcome all of you here and would like to thank our distinguished panelists for their participation, for their ongoing support of the Joan Shorenstein Center.

Almost 20 years ago Joan's friends, including Al Hunt who's here and others, worked with me to convene a meeting at Don Graham's office in Washington where the idea of this center was formed. And I'd also like to particularly mention Frank Stanton, Graham Allison and Derek Bok who were the ones

that created and helped stimulate me to participate in this center and their ongoing support.

The Center was created to honor the passionate dedication my daughter Joan brought to her work in journalism. Like our panelists Joan began her career in the network news, played a central role in planning our national dialogue. She understood the critical importance of professionalism, integrity and impartiality in presenting the issues of the day. With the advent of the 24 hour news cycle and the spread of the internet we have seen our sources of information increase dramatically. This proliferation has brought with it increasing partisanship and diminishing reliability. As newcomers fight to capture some segment of the market, sensationalism and [MICROPHONE MALFUNCTION]. And with corporate media empires more focused on the bottom line – the microphone, do you hear me?

MAN: The microphone –

MAN: Talk about yourself.

[LAUGHTER]

WALTER SHORENSTEIN: Hello, can you hear me?

SEVERAL: Yes.

WALTER SHORENSTEIN: With corporate media empires more focused on the bottom line than in serving the public's interest, it's not surprising that amongst voters, turnout has declined as partisanship has grown. I applaud the tireless efforts of our panelists to resist the rush to dumb down the news. Throughout their careers these individuals have set the standard for professionalism and journalism's integrity. They understood the importance that quality journalism has for an informed democracy. Like the Joan

Shorenstein Center they're working hard to preserve the enduring values of high quality journalism.

Please join me in thanking and welcoming the remarkable group of people and thank you for being here.

[APPLAUSE]

ALEX JONES: I'm Alex Jones. I'm Director of The Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. And I too want to thank you. That's the end of the thanks. Now please enjoy your brunch and we will resume the program as soon as we've all eaten. And welcome, thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[BREAK]

ALEX JONES: Let me once again introduce myself. I'm Alex Jones. I'm the Director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. It's my great pleasure to invite you to join us now for a conversation about politics, policy and the campaign with a very distinguished group of panelists. Very briefly before we go on though, let me say how much I appreciate Walter Shorenstein and his constant and ongoing efforts to make events like this possible. The Shorenstein Center at Harvard and the Kennedy School at Harvard fulfills we think a unique role and that role has been made possible by Walter Shorenstein. And if you would, please join me in an ovation for him.

[APPLAUSE]

ALEX JONES: I also want to pay particular thanks to John De Luca who has been a very good friend of the Shorenstein Center. John De Luca, through the

Wine Institute which he heads, has been the underwriter for today's brunch.
John De Luca, thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

ALEX JONES: We have a lot to talk about as everyone in this room certainly knows. We have a very distinguished panel. They do not require long introductions and I am not going to introduce them to, you know, at length. But I do want to introduce them briefly. From left to right, beginning with my immediate left: Jill Abramson, who's the Managing Editor of *The New York Times*, former Washington Bureau Chief of *The New York Times*; John Podhoretz, who is a regular on the Fox News channel, he's a columnist for the *New York Post* and *The National Review Online*. He is also a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard*.

David Gergen is all the way, next to last, Director, The Center of Public Leadership – what happens when you have your names in the wrong order as you tend to read what you've got in front of you. Isn't that terrible. I think it was because David was on my mind this morning because of something those of you who are readers of *The New York Times* learned, I certainly, for the first time. In *The New York Times* this morning David Gergen, who is a colleague of mine at the Kennedy School, the Director of the Center for Public Leadership, as I said, acknowledged, admitted, confessed – frame it as you will –

DAVID GERGEN: [OVERLAPPING] Confirmed.

ALEX JONES: That he crafted the language that Gerald Ford spoke which prompted the headline in the *Daily News* in 1975, "Ford to City: Drop Dead," [LAUGHTER] which has colored the relationship between the Republic Party and New York City from that day on.

Al Hunt, next to John Podhoretz, Executive Washington Editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, who writes a weekly column there and directs polling. He is also on CNN's "The Capital Gang" where he duels weekly with Robert Novak, which is quite a duel in sun, if you will. And Joe Klein, at the end, weekly column on politics is one of the things that is the hallmark of the strength of the, just the early section of *Time Magazine*. Joe is one of the most long lived and prescient analysts of politics that we have in this country, a long history of covering politics for *The New Yorker* and *Newsweek* and others. He is also, as I'm sure you all know, the author of anonymous or the anonymous author of *Primary Colors* I should say. Not so anonymous now.

The way we're going to structure this is that I'm going to be introducing a topic so we're going to be having a conversation. We are not going to be having speeches. Everybody's invited to participate and when we get near the end we're going to open the mikes in the floor so that you can join us as well.

Let me begin, John Podhoretz, with you. The issue that has been obsessing both the media and the campaigns this past two weeks has been the question of the Kerry swift boat as history in Vietnam. This is something that has made very big news but it has been very difficult to get clarity on what the truth is. The question is: journalistically speaking, what is the right way to deal with hugely explosive allegations such as this that come in the middle of a campaign? What's fair game, what's not, journalistically speaking?

JOHN PODHORETZ: Well I think that everything in terms of a person's public life is fair game to the extent that the allegations have some substantiated basis in fact. And I think that the story of the last three weeks is that there was a common presumption by a lot of people, including me, that the allegations against Senator Kerry were unsubstantiated and had no basis in fact. And it was, I think, largely treated that way by the news organizations and others who might have invested resources, let's say, into proving or disproving these allegations.

The phenomenon that is so striking and that obviously Senator Kerry himself believed required addressing is that despite a relatively news blackout on the part of these organizations with resources to sort of do the digging as eventually happened, that the story gained purchase. And it gained purchase not just because of the commercials that were made but because of people that I would call amateur journalists – or you might even call them partisan journalists – self publishing, most of them, on the internet who, along with the material that appeared in the book by John O’Neill and the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, kept digging and pushing and finding discrepancies and digging up speeches in the *Congressional Record* from 1986 in which Kerry would say, allege that he had been in Cambodia when there appears to be no reason to believe that he was in Cambodia in Christmas 1968, that a new phenomenon has arisen that everybody has to take measure of and that people can complain about and be upset about.

But that there is a competition now with mainstream journalism on the part of people who are not paid to be journalists, who are not career journalist, who are not guild members of the field that we call journalism but are nonetheless highly engaged, highly literate, highly intelligent, highly educated, good at research, efficient at the use of, you know, the media like the internet and Nexus and the *Congressional Record* and things like that. And they are capable of keeping a story alive by advancing it just as stories are kept, have been kept alive by being advanced by news organizations day in, day out with little new pieces of information.

This is an unprecedented phenomenon. We say it start building up, had it’s first scalp in 2002 when Trent Lott was essentially brought down by bloggers and we don’t know what the effect is going to be. But I think the effect is huge and I cannot see how, if you find the effect distressing, how this genie can be stuffed back in the bottle.

ALEX JONES: Jill Abramson, I know that *The New York Times* has devoted a lot of resources, or did devote a lot of resources at some point in trying to get to the truth about this. Was this – do you agree with John that this is something effectively that the web –

JILL ABRAMSON: [OVERLAPPING] Set off by – I don't agree –

ALEX JONES: [OVERLAPPING] That the web is, that the web made something that would not die and that there was enough there – it kept, as in, as John Podhoretz said, in the Trent Lott case. There was a speech, the mainstream media covered the speech, everyone ignored it but it stayed alive on the web and eventually it caught the eye and attention of the mainstream media. There was genuine reporting at that point and eventually Trent Lott resigned. Is this comparable in a situation? I mean politically obviously different but is it working the same way?

JILL ABRAMSON: I don't view it exactly like that. I don't want to discount the role of bloggers and, you know, so called alternative press outlets but I think the biography of John Kerry was going to be a leitmotif of coverage of this campaign. And because at the Democratic convention his Vietnam service, the band of brothers was showcased from the first delegates arriving on Saturday and so much of what was going on at the convention was focused on his service, that his introduction, "I'm reporting for duty," that that in and of itself would have put the whole Vietnam period back into play.

I think the thing that really was the accelerant for this story though, what was the book, the Regnery publish, you know, Regnery is the preeminent publisher of books on the right, extremely usually partisan, often in terms of their factual base challenged. A lot of their best sellers when you look deeply behind the facts have been dubious. So you have the Regnery book and you had this advertising campaign that was underwritten by a prominent Republican, Mr. Perry. And I think those two things really kind of propelled this story. I think

the blogs, yeah, are a factor but I don't think are the accelerant of driving this story.

ALEX JONES: Al Hunt, one of the things that has, that strikes me about this is what John Podhoretz says, that the genie is out of the bottle on this. That there is now going to be this kind of parallel universe, quasi-journalism, partisan journalism, journalism that has factual basis but may not be as rigorously reported as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and other might but nonetheless has the power of enough truth to affect the way people think. What do you see here?

AL HUNT: Well I think John has a point. I think though that the bloggers and the others were the starting point. But the reason it gained currency, the reason it became a huge national issue was because the mainstream media, principally television – I hope my wife's still not here cause I hate to criticize the medium that contributes two-thirds of our household income – but principally television picked it up. I mean there have been other examples that were not picked up – that Vince Foster was murdered, that Bill Clinton was a drug dealer. They were the same sort of people who did that and CNN and CNBC and Fox and others didn't run with that story.

This story they very – the perpetrators – very effectively got television in particular to pick up. That ad buy was a teeny ad buy. I forget what it was, it was –

JILL ABRAMSON: But it provided pictures.

AL HUNT: Exactly. But every day it was on television. I mean the so-called free media was what made this story. And it wasn't done, it was done – I think the journalism in those first couple of days, in that first week or so – was just atrocious. It was just kind of put out there.

ALEX JONES: It was journalism about the fact that the charges had been made.

AL HUNT: Right. Right. I mean it was like in 19 – can you imagine in 1960, PT Veterans Against Jack Kennedy and Jack Kennedy was a fraud and for a week we had that out there. That's what we live with today and I do think, however, that if – and I'm criticizing CNN and others – if they had done a better job that first week I don't think the story would have gained the kind of [UNINTEL]. If they'd done the kind of job that *The New York Times* and *The LA Times* and *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune* eventually did . . .

JOHN PODHORETZ: I'm sorry, if 250 fellow PT veterans of John Kennedy's in 1960 had gotten up and said that there was, that there were questions about Kennedy's service that would have been a news story. I mean it wasn't just one guy, it's not just – it wasn't just like a theory as you say about how Ron Brown was murdered and they crashed the plane to kill Ron Brown, which is something that lunatics on the right believe and that was circulated and that got nowhere. I mean this was a, there was a, there was a, there's a very specific allegation here that is being made by a whole mess of people. That is, that's unprecedented also. I mean you can't, I mean that, it happened in March or April without the commercial and nobody paid that much attention. But that is – I mean if you actually look at it as a news event, that is 250 people who were also swift boat veterans say the Democratic presidential candidate is a liar, that's – it's a startling fact that deserves coverage at least for a day, maybe not for three weeks.

ALEX JONES: David Gergen.

DAVID GERGEN: I think Al it essentially right on how the story took off. It, there is a – long before the Democratic convention *The Boston Globe*, as you'll recall, investigated this, did along story, it cast some doubt but the story

simply had no legs and it went away. And then I think Kerry put this into play at his own convention, as Jill said. But what we know from the Annenberg survey that Kathleen Hall Jamieson takes –and I think she has one of the best of these surveys of how the public responds to what they see – she identified talk radio and cable news shows as the ones that really brought this to public attention and then forced a lot of the mainstream print press to deal with it in a different way.

But I think it's – the bloggers may have lit the match but it was really talk radio and cable news, especially the more conservative ones. But it seems to me at about a week or two in it took on a different coloration, it moved to a second stage and that is it became a, it became much more of a political story because it opened a window into the political character of each one of the campaigns. And it raised questions about George W. Bush, what kind campaigns his friends, Team Bush, brought. I mean we've seen a pattern with, of course, with McCain and Max Cleland.

But it also opened a window into John Kerry and a test of John Kerry and I think that the story became, wow, you know, it became a larger metaphor. If you can't defend yourself against an attack you know that's coming, with \$200,000 attack, how good are you going to be as commander in chief at protecting the country? I mean I think it became a test of his political capacity as well. So that it took on, I thought it took on a different coloration in the last 10 days from where the original story in an interesting open window into the campaign.

ALEX JONES: I mean that may well be that the sort of, for the aficionados the window into the campaign was the most important. But I would think that for most Americans the issue was: is it true or is it not? And my question is if you are an American who is dependent upon the media for your information, do you have a way now in this environment of this parallel universe of an

increasingly partisan press, of having reassurance, having assurance that you know what the truth is, that you know what the truth is? Joe Klein.

JOE KLEIN: Well, first of all, let me apologize in advance. My cell phone's on because my daughter in law in Boston is in labor right now and –

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE]

ALEX JONES: That's not for – we're not applauding her labor. We're applauding for the eventuality after the labor.

JOE KLEIN: And so I figure I, you know, can all help her along, think good thoughts.

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

JOE KLEIN: But – what was the question? [LAUGHTER] No, look, look, I spent three years in the 1980s dealing with a group of Vietnam veterans, a platoon of veterans for a book that I wrote that was called *Payback*. And during that time I tried to reconstruct a single battle. And the problem with a story like this is that there will never be a single version of the truth. But we do know this and I think that we were, that the media were at fault in a couple of ways. We didn't frame this properly. One of the frames of it is that George W. Bush has participated in two national campaigns for president and at various points in each of those campaigns he was facing a Vietnam war hero and somehow, somehow mysteriously that person's record in warfare was slimed. Now that's important point number one for me.

Important point number two is that over the last few weeks the so-called Swift Boat Veterans for So-Called Truth, many of their truths have been totally

knocked down. Most of them have been and indeed it's been learned because of reporting in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* that many of these guys when this issue came up, when the issue of Kerry's silver star came up in his 1996 campaign, they sided with Kerry. So I'm curious about this group and I'm curious about how it came to be and I'm curious about how these guys who took one position six years, or eight years ago are taking another position now.

But the thing that I'm most curious and distressed about is this. I've been doing this for 34 years, 35 years, and in every campaign that I've ever covered since the first, candidates have said this is crossroads, we're at a cross – my first campaign in Peabody, Massachusetts for zoning board, they were in charge of canine control and one of the candidates actually said, "This is a crossroads in the history of canine control." [LAUGHTER]

Well, I actually think that for the first time in a very, very long time – certainly in my lifetime as a reporter – it's true. We're facing several huge, huge issues now and the fact that this kind of, this kind of nonsense, this scurrilous, despicable nonsense – the fact that it has dominated the news for the last couple of weeks is something that is going to be inevitable when you have charges these outrageous, when you go after someone's war record. But I still think it's pretty sad.

JOHN PODHORETZ: I don't, I do not agree with that in this sense. I think that if the charges has been purely scurrilous nonsense, not only would the story have died but that the backlash that the Kerry campaign is hoping for and that some of the data last week suggests might be starting would have been almost instantaneous. The problem for the Kerry campaign and the reason that the story was kept alive – and this is where the blogger thing gets a little more interesting – is that some of the charges turned out not to be scurrilous. That is to say –

JOE KLEIN: Name one.

JOHN PODHORETZ: That he was, that he claimed to have been in Cambodia in Christmas 1968 having been sent there by Richard Nixon when (a) as we all know Nixon was not yet president and (b) there is no reason to believe that this was true.

JOE KLEIN: Oh, my god, that's such a terrible charge against him.

JOHN PODHORETZ: It is.

JOE KLEIN: I mean and John O'Neill who is a leader of this disgusting group turns out that he was reporting back that he was on the border of Cambodia at the same time.

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] Well gee, John O'Neill isn't the Democratic candidate for president, Joe.

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

JOE KLEIN: Compared to the war in Iraq is this important?

ALEX JONES: We're not going to use this time to debate the reality.

AL HUNT: Alex, let me jump in though on the media part of it –

ALEX JONES: [OVERLAPPING] But the media part of it is very important.

AL HUNT: Let me just take – cause I am must closer to Joe's view on this. But the central charges were that he, that his awards, his medals were phony, the Bronze Star, the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. The latest was – this is a good media story – the latest was the Purple Heart and they got this admiral,

retired admiral down in South Carolina, comes out the other day and says, “I was on the boat with John Kerry and he wasn’t wounded.” Now, you know, that was the story that was played, received rather widespread coverage both on television and in some newspapers.

Well if you take the time to call the two people who were undeniably on that boat – one guy’s a factory worker in Ohio today and the other’s a retired telephone install person in Florida – they remember that day, December 2, 1968 vividly. They describe it in great detail. They describe this 14 foot Boston whaler with an outboard and their commanding officer on that boat, John Kerry, giving them orders as to where to fire and when to start the boat and they say there’s no way in the world that this guy could have been on the boat. Now any journalism, any good journalism would say this guy may be sadly, tragically mistaken, he may be lying, who knows but it’s a he, it’s not a, you know, one the one hand on the other hand. It’s a phony story.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Okay, but – and I agree with that – I mean –

AL HUNT: [OVERLAPPING] But that’s not the way it was played the first day, John.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Okay, no. But here’s my point. You want to make fun of the Cambodia element of the story that’s, that is your, that’s your right. And that is the way these things happen. Facts go out, they either connect to people or they don’t connect to people. A blogger – I can’t remember which one – went to the *Congressional Record* – and found the speech in –

MAN: [UNINTEL]

JOHN PODHORETZ: It’s, reproduced it in his blog in which Kerry said, “I have this memory seared in me.” And if Kerry loses the election in November, the word seared is going to be one of those things like the snowflake on Ed

Muskie's face that people will look back to and say, here's one of the ways in which a candidate did something, whether something was done to him or not unjustly, did something to himself in his own language or his own behavior that contributed in some way, even though it was not contemporaneous, to his own defeat. And you can deny that that is a fact. That's fine, except it is a fact.

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

ALEX JONES: Let me ask you, John. The issue from, I'm taking the part of the innocent reader who is trying to actually understand what is going on. I want to know not what happened with the Congressional Record, I want to know whether this is true. Now my question is, do we now live in an environment where answering that question is going to be impossible perhaps because we have access to too much information because there are – as anyone who's ever worked on anything like this knows, you can always find people who have different memories of the same event.

Is the role of the media that has been the traditional one in this country anyway, of the honest broker of information that is going to be deciding for the public what is true and what is not and giving them a definitive truth that at least they can have some confidence in, are those days over because we're now going to have – on any issue – a competing set of truth.

JILL ABRAMSON: If I believed that was true I would walk out of the Harvard Club and never go back to my office. Because at least for the part of the media that I represent, which is a national newspaper that treasures its credibility and its role as an honest arbiter, you know, the last place you can go to that will not matter how impossible the story, no matter what the thicket of he said, she said, on the one hand on the other, will actually commit experienced investigative reporters who will track down every witness, survey

the landscape and at the end of the day in a fair way say where the weight of evidence – you can never say –

ALEX JONES: [OVERLAPPING] But can that –

JILL ABRAMSON: Everyone on one side is lying, everyone on the other side has the truth.

ALEX JONES: [OVERLAPPING] But can that catch up?

JILL ABRAMSON: That is – if that's gone then journalism is gone.

ALEX JONES: But can that catch up with talking heads on cable news making allegations at each other?

JILL ABRAMSON: [OVERLAPPING] It can't go at the same pace. And I will say having supervised the work on this story at the *Times*, a frustration certainly was that you had the book, you had the TV ad, you had the tremendous pickup and it takes work. It takes an investment – we had three reporters, excellent reporters, working full time on this, finding the people, talking to them and then with editors figuring out that moment when you actually have the way, where you can use the authority of *The New York Times* to say we've talked to 30 of these people or 40 of these people. It's, the weight is it doesn't hold up. We found people who had signed affidavits for John O'Neill who said, "I didn't know what I was signing."

That it fell apart but it took an investment of experienced reporters to get to the bottom of it.

ALEX JONES: [OVERLAPPING] It took time and money –

JILL ABRAMSON: And I will never pull the plug on that process just to compete with the din of blogs, TV or talk radio. And I apologize if that means a newspaper like the *Times* is slow but I so believe in the role of weighing, of getting all the information that if that's gone then the whole enterprise is gone.

ALEX JONES: David Gergen.

DAVID GERGEN: I don't think that's gone but I do think that *The New York Times* has lost some of its sovereignty over what it prints. That you would not have covered the story the story in the way you did had it not blown up as a political story lower down the food chain. And that what we unfortunately do face – cause I think it's there – is it's possible for people to put poison into the bottom of the food chain and see it work its way up through the system. And that you wouldn't print it on its – if they came to you initially you wouldn't print it. We saw this all during the Clinton administration, this is not especially new.

What we have in politics are two situations. One is sometimes the facts are in dispute. But at other times people just blatantly lie and they blatantly put garbage into the system and there are now places you can get that stuff out, you know, Vince Foster and his suicide. How much, how many, how much time do we have to spend putting down bad questions?

JOE KLEIN: How many investigations?

DAVID GERGEN: And how many investigations? It was all nonsense. It was made up. But it's possible to put it into the lower end of the food chain and get some and get some heat generated and then you have to come along and cover something you probably, you never would have touched.

ALEX JONES: I don't think it's fair to say the lower end of the food chain. It seems to me that when you look at cable news especially there is, the format

of cable news is talk, it is mostly conversation. It is people who have different opinions, mostly extreme opinions it seems to me, who are making assertions about Kerry, about Bush, about whoever, in an environment in which they are not necessarily compelled to back up those allegations. They are using their time to say these things flatly and a lot of people view that as news.

That is not what has traditionally been the American style of journalism. But increasingly for – not just because it's good television but because news organizations, mainstream news organizations have shrunk the amount of money that they're willing to give for the reporters, for the time, for the energy, for the experience that it takes to verify information. This other is much cheaper and it's more interesting, it's faster, it's fast but it's shallow. Is that where we're headed?

JOE KLEIN: My feeling in general about this presidential campaign is that unfortunately I think that both campaigns and the entire press are still living in a September 10th world. They're living in a world that – and it was a very powerful world that existed for 40 years before September 11th. It was an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity and affluence and it was period when we kind of began to lose the habits of citizenship. And I think quite rightly. I think for a long time politics really didn't affect the heart and soul and gut of people's lives, their children's future and so on.

And during that time, especially in the 90s with the growth of the all news networks we suddenly found gangs and groups and various people shouting at each other on TV and, you know, it had some entertainment value at that point which was okay because there wasn't anything big at stake. But now, suddenly, there are huge things at stake and so for the last two weeks we found ourselves talking about Cambodia rather than talking about Najaf. And I think it's a real big problem for everybody to make the adjustment.

Let me just say one other thing about Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. This is pretty standard politics. It's, you know, it's standard in political campaigns and in magic. It's the question of misdirection. If you get John Kerry talking about his Vietnam service they we're not talking about George Bush's remarkable decision to go into Iraq preemptively. The sad irony here is that John Kerry has shown absolutely no willingness to talk about George Bush's remarkable decision to go into Iraq preemptively. And I feel that if he had, if he had grabbed control of this campaign and said, look, the big question here is – and it's an honest different – whether this was the right or the wrong thing to do and that's what we should be talking about, I think that things like Swift Boat Veterans for Truth would have had a lot less purchase.

AL HUNT: Well, but Alex, can I just say – I concur with everything that Jill said and thank god that we have the Jill Abramsons to lead that kind of journalism. But I think that just in the last decade it has changed, the whole environment has changed so much that some of what John talked about complicates that effort. Let me just give you – the last time I directed coverage in a campaign was '92. I'll just give you two quick example because I try to think of what they'd be like today. One a story that panned out, one that didn't.

October of 1991 I sent a young kid named Jeff Birnbaum down to cover Clinton. And everyone talking was talking about Clinton and sex and I said, "Jesus we wouldn't know what to do with that story if we got it so there's no point in us spending any time looking at sex." But I had been told by several people in Arkansas that his draft record just didn't add up. So I said, "Jeff, just take a look and see what you come up with." Jeffrey spent a couple of months and he talked to a lot of people and finally got someone to talk. We ran the story in February. It was a hell of a story and a very important story.

I would suggest today that with those rumors down there – we've always had the bottom of the food chain, that's nothing new. The difference is the bottom

of the food chain rather than just be gossip, the bottom of the food chain suddenly appears on national television today. That story would not have – Jeff Birnbaum did it very thoughtfully.

JILL ABRAMSON: That story would have been a book now.

AL HUNT: And it would have been out in an entirely different way. Second story – cause I’m – guy who was I thought a pretty good source called and said I’ve got a great story for you. This is in September, the whole issue was Bill Clinton avoiding the draft. He said George Bush’s son got kicked out of the Marine Corps because he was a coward, he couldn’t . . . And I thought, geez that’s a hell of a story – gave me names. I mean we looked at some documents, it looked incredible. It was a guy named Tom Petzinger, who used to be my deputy, I sent down to Texas. I mean we thought we had a story that was going to just transform the election.

You know something? There was in 1969 a George Bush from Texas who got kicked out of the Marine Corps. The only problem was his name was George L. Bush not George W. Bush. [LAUGHTER] Now we spent three or four – we spent more than that. We spent about five days including one of the most talented reporters that I knew going down. Now that story, there’s no way that story wouldn’t have come out. And it would have been irresponsible.

ALEX JONES: These stories that Joe has made and that Al has just told, are they anachronisms? I mean are we, are we really moving into a much more European style of partisan news reporting that is going to be investigative but only in terms of promotion of an ideological perspective? I mean I know there are going to be some exceptions. It’s, not, we’re not there yet. But I mean do you see us really moving in that direction? And, John, I’d like to get your reaction to that too.

DAVID GERGEN: You find, you have the press dividing into two nations just in the same way the nation is divided. It strikes me that the answer to that is yes and no. Within the cable news framework and some stations and some shows we all know that they're much more partisan. Within the mainstream media I think they're, you know, you take *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine*, *New York Times*, *New York Post* – well *New York Post* I think is very hard hitting from the right. I think, John, you would agree with that as a general proposition, especially on the editorial page I think it's very hard hitting from the right, especially editorials and your columns and others.

But I think in general the mainstream big newspapers and magazines and television networks are not. But there is a perception on the part of the voters increasingly that they are. And I think this segmentation that Andy Kohut has been discussing recently – he's from the Pew Center and has done I think a lot of valuable work and had a piece in *The New York Times* about six weeks ago on segmentation of voters by news organization. And what we find is that Republicans increasingly view *The New York Times* as a Democratic newspaper and lo and behold your ombudsman came and said about three or four weeks ago that it was a liberal newspaper. I was surprised at the conclusion that he reached. It was pretty, pretty – I thought, I thought it was greyer, I thought the newspaper was in a greyer position than the ombudsman said.

But there is a – so that you get Republicans veering away from *The New York Times* and they veer toward Fox and they veer away from CNN. You get, you know, the folks who watch CNN today, a disproportionate number are Democrats and folks who watch Fox a disproportionate number are Republican. So there's a perception that's taking hold in the country that I think is very unfortunate and I don't think is entirely fair about a lot of the mainstream press that it is become much more partisan in recent years. *The Washington Post*, CNN, *LA Times*, really – you know, Bob Dole will go on the

air and say, “all the usual suspects,” and he’ll reel off five or six major news organizations, they’re all over to the left these days.

And that perception is taking hold and I don’t think it’s entirely fair. I think there are some instances you could find that, their editorial page does not reflect that. But I think it’s really down in the cable and the talk shows and radio where you find this. It is quite strikingly I think partisan on both sides.

ALEX JONES: John Podhoretz.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Well I mean I don’t want to get into – I mean we could be here from now until, you know, judgment day discussing the question of bias in the media and liberal bias versus conservative bias and whether or not [UNINTEL]. I think it is self evidently the fact that while the mainstream media may not be specifically biased in a partisan way in the sense that it seeks specifically to elect Democrats and to defeat Republicans, I think culturally there is no question that the cultural interests of the people who define themselves as conservatives are ill covered, are ill considered and are unfairly maligned, often unthinkingly and unreasoningly, by the mainstream media and this has given a gigantic opening not only to talk radio and to the Fox news channel and to the blogs but to god knows what else will arise.

Now [UNINTEL]? I think that part of the experience of bemoaning a story like the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth we’re missing one element of it which is: so the story bubbled along and there was – two things happened I think that made it continue that are, that are dynamics in a political year. One of them is that John Kerry himself, who is the presidential candidate, did nothing to change the subject. This speaks to what Joe is talking about. That is to say that when the conversation was going in a direction you do not wish and you have a gigantic microphone, theoretically you should be able to try to redirect the conversation in a direction that is more favorable to you. He, for reasons I don’t understand, failed to do that entirely. That’s, I think, partially because he

is being so cautious that he does not wish to advance a positive, sort of to go at things in that way. He's got a different strategy and it backfired on him.

The other is that I think there is reason to believe that if you watched the trajectory of the story that it was done, that is was sputtering out a bit. That is that the swift boats had thrown their three major charges out; you and the Post had done your stories which added a little fuel for a while; and he, the Kerry campaign and Kerry himself, decided based on whatever internal information he had that was worrisome to him to go at this head on himself. And when a, when the presidential candidate says my rival is smearing me and he must act in thus and such a way he gave it six more days of life. Now that is just simply – I've worked in politics and I've in journalism and I am mystified. I am mystified at that.

I mean maybe it'll work, maybe it'll turn out that this will end up boomeranging but Kerry himself behaved in ways that kept the story alive both by, you know, omission and then by commission. And you cannot fault reporters, news organizations from then giving the five days of coverage to the Kerry campaign, the Bush campaign, the charges and countercharges, all of which served to make people wonder, okay well what is going on with this if they didn't hear it.

JOE KLEIN: You know I think that that you're absolutely right and I think that the reason why the Kerry campaign did that is because they probably had some internal polls and focus groups that told them that this story would ultimately work to their benefit. Which raises to me a really interesting question about political coverage in general and about politics in general. In an era when upwards of 90 percent of the people who are called by pollsters don't answer the phone, why do we pay so much attention to this stuff? I mean this is smoke and mirrors, this is voodoo. And furthermore, I wrote about this last week. The Kerry campaign's response to their focus groups, the focus groups said that they wanted an optimistic candidate with a positive plan for

the future. And as James Carville said to me, “There hasn’t been a focus group in the history of the world that hasn’t wanted an optimistic candidate with a positive plan for the future.”

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE B]

AL HUNT: You're waiting for those people who say give a slimy, dirty
[LAUGHTER OBSCURES].

JOE KLEIN: You know you're in a room full of strangers, you're going to be your most noble self. I want to read an awful lot more about health insurance, that sort of thing. [LAUGHTER] And it just, it escapes me – number one, I think there's been a real problem for the Democratic party because they pay a lot more attention to this than the Republicans. I mean the Republicans have fairly, you know, they're the party of the simple sentence, you know, strong military, low taxes, traditional values. Democrats have been traditionally the party of the compound sentence; we have to this in order to get that.

And the consultants, that just drives them crazy. I mean that puts us at a tremendous disadvantage, the Democratic consultants think. And I just, I find it very depressing that you get campaign after campaign after campaign, 2002 congressional campaign being the most recent example and perhaps this one, where instead of actually talking about the stuff that people really care about you get them playing these ridiculous games that John just referred to.

ALEX JONES: Joe, one of the things that polls indicate is that Americans agree on much more than would seem to be the case in the red and blue nation that we have constructed, especially for a media explanation of how we are now as a country. Let me shift gears just a moment. There's no question that there is intense energy in this election and all of this anger and all of this feeling of passion is being poured into the election itself. And on both sides people are hopeful and on both sides people at least expect there's a serious possibility that they will win.

After the election one group is going to be happy and one group is going to be very unhappy. So what happens then in this nation of ours in which we've

framed it as red and blue but in fact we are a centrist nation still in terms of the way we feel but the media image it seems to me that we portray is one of extremes and animosity and conflict rather than that shared. How is this going to show itself and how is it going to play itself out after the election do you think?

JOE KLEIN: Well I'm pretty fearful. I think that the cable news format is kind of here to stay. And, you know, it mystifies me a little bit to hear CNN described as a liberal network. I've been on the air there for about the past year or so and they bend over backwards to represent all points of view and I believe to a fault. That almost every time you see an issue discussed instead of having an expert or someone who might be able to see the pluses and minuses of both sides as the talking head, you always have to have someone from the perceived left and to be very sure that it's, that the point of view is represented it has to be someone from the extreme left and someone from the extreme right. Or you, or they put on these talking heads who delivered, you know, the political campaign people who deliver their talking points.

I think that that's a matter of cowardice. I think that instead of making informed news judgments these networks have fallen back onto presenting both sides in that way and I think it's a kind of disturbing trend.

JILL ABRAMSON: I don't it's just presenting both sides. I think it's that when you present the most extreme sides it's perceived as the most entertaining and provocative.

ALEX JONES: So, Al Hunt, you're on a provocative show. Why is it that trying to find consensus, trying to find agreement bores people? Why is it that there is no energy apparently, or entertainment value, in trying to find that place? Is there potential there that hasn't been realized or is it just a non-starter?

AL HUNT: You try sitting next to Robert Novak every Saturday. I'm going to tell a quick story cause I think it tells about television. One of Jill's illustrious predecessors, James Reston who was one of the people that talked me into going into journalism when I was a college student, and in the late 80s, early 90s I used to have lunch with Scotty Reston at least once a year. And at one point when I was running the Washington bureau he said, "Hunt, I'm going to tell you *The Wall Street Journal's* coverage is the best I've ever seen. It's must reading." And my head went ten times normal because here's my idol telling me what a great job we're doing.

I said, "Thank you." He said, "Let me ask you a question." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Why do you do those silly television shows?" And I went to explain that you reach a different audience and how Washington was changing. And he said, "I see." And I said, "What's that?" He said, "Mid-life crisis." [LAUGHTER] And I said, "Yeah, that's probably the best explanation." So that's the only explanation I can give. I think we've been doing the show that I do for 16 years. I have a terrible confession. I love Robert Novak. He's never been right about a thing but I think he's a very, very smart fellow and I think occasionally it's edifying, sometimes it's not.

But you're not looking for, you know, basically when you're on a cable television show and you're in a dialogue like that it's not the "News Hour" with Jim Lehrer. They're not looking for a balanced sober discussion.

ALEX JONES: John Podhoretz.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Alex, half a mile from here there are hundreds of thousands of people who believe, many of them believe that George Bush is the present day equivalent of Adolph Hitler. They believe that. They do not believe, they do believe it. And they are, just as in the 90s there were people on the right who believed that Bill Clinton was the most evil creature ever to have walked the earth. People who uphold these opinions are, play a

vital role in the American political system. Maybe that is unfortunate, we wish it were not so, we wish that people were more reasoned and more measured.

But the story from about September of 2003 'til John Kerry got the nomination in – what was is – March of 2004 was an unceasing, a Democratic season with an unceasing focus on very personal attacks on George W. Bush. They were, that was happening because the political system demanded it. That is to say that the Democratic primary system demanded that this anger had gotten very personal. Similarly now there is a personal anger being thrown at Kerry. Is the American people, are the American people broadly understood centrists?

I suppose that the American people broadly understood are centrists. Are the 105 million or so who vote in elections centrist? I don't think so. There's 300 million people in the country, there's 105 million people who will reliably, reasonably vote in presidential elections and to judge from at least, let's say, 60 to 70 million of those they believe that the party of the other side wishes to do significant damage to the country. And they hold the whip hand in the United States.

ALEX JONES: And how of much of that do you think you could lay to the media's door?

JOHN PODHORETZ: None. I'm sorry, in this case these are deeply, deeply held beliefs and convictions. Joe is opposed to the president's pre-emptive, doctrine of pre-emption. I support it. The results of, you know, the, this is, these are, we're not, you know, we're not car dealers in Oklahoma. We're different types of people –

JOE KLEIN: But, John, there's a real difference here. You support everything the president does and I support – and I don't oppose everything the president does. I'm a, you know, my, I'm kind of, Gergen and I both and, and,

are, are an old and probably anachronistic breed. I'm a kind of moderate. I mean I agree with most of Bush's –

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] No you are a moderate. Right.

JOE KLEIN: I agree with much of the Republican domestic policy. Not all of it. And I disagree with this war. But there isn't any room now on television, or not much room on television for – cause CNN so much problem because when they want to put me up against a right winger I, I say well I'm not going to really fully represent the left as well as I might be. Because, you know, I'll criticize John Kerry on certain things as I have here today and I think that it is – we're really doing a disservice, we're really doing a disservice by presenting the world as you seem to think it is now.

Because if you look at Andy Kohut's numbers 15 percent on each side are hyperpartisans. There's another 15 percent that are leaners. And there are 40 percent in the middle. What Kohut says is that the 15 percent leaners are being more and more influenced by the hyperpartisans on each side. Now I think that there's a real problem here. I think that we in the media have to decide whether we're here to entertain or to inform. And I think that the balance has shifted a little bit too far in the direction of entertainment so that Jill's job is that much harder now. And I do think it's a real problem that we face as a society.

ALEX JONES: David.

DAVID GERGEN: I just want to respond on two points. I think, I agree with most of Joe's analysis but I don't, I wouldn't totally despair about the state of the media. After all there are, you know, Tim Russert has built a significant following on Sunday mornings by presenting a show that is not partisan either way but it's just hard hitting and probing. It's very good journalism. It's the way Koppel built his show originally. And Tom Friedman has built a

following in *The New York Times*. He was basically for the war but a large of people want to pick and read Tom Friedman every day, every time his column appears. And he's on vacation or he's writing a book now and, you know, we miss him in the midst of trying to figure out Najaf.

There are number and it's not an accident that *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* have become national newspapers. Because the regional newspaper for the most part are not as good as they should be and people are looking for more reliable sources of information and they find it in these national newspapers. So I don't think it's all despair. I think there's a lot of muck within the field now.

But I want to come back to the larger question which is the one you posed to Joe a few minutes ago. Post election – I share in Joe's very deep concern about where we're going to be the day after this election is over. On the Democratic side if we've just seen the turning point in this campaign, if Bush has gained some traction here in the last two or three weeks, if we look back, if Democrats look back and say the turning point came over the swift boat controversy and in fact we had the issues on our side but we were out maneuvered especially by this kind of stuff, there's going to be an awful lot of anger and I think that's going to be very difficult to govern.

And the other part of this is that I think the one big area where we've let the candidates off the hook is that neither candidate is being candid with us about the choices we face and where they would go in the future.

[JOE KLEIN (?): That's right.

DAVID GERGEN: I just this is the, this campaign is one of the emptiest in terms of serious conversation about the big issues we face, the big choices we face. Do you know what the strategy of George W. Bush or John Kerry's

going to be in the war on terrorism after this is over? What are we going to do about Iran, what are we going to do about North Korea?

ALEX JONES: David Gergen, do we have a clue?

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

DAVID GERGEN: We're worried about global warming.

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

DAVID GERGEN: What's that?

ALEX JONES: Critique the campaign coverage, not the candidates but the coverage of the campaign.

DAVID GERGEN: The campaign coverage is, you know, I, *The New York Times* has tried to stress very heavily the substantive side but we get keeping pulled back to horse race. We're, we're – or the swift boats. And I think the swift boat thing has been an enormous diversion at a time when we should be coming to grips with what's happening to the jobs, what's happened to the economy, what's happened to global warming, what's happened to these deficits, what are we going to do.

I don't think we have a clue where these candidates, what these candidates are going to be and I'll tell you some of the Kerry campaign is not being – you know, they're doing a lot of rope-a-dope on some of these issues. They're, most of their time on Iraq seems to be spent on how they're going to game plan the rest of the election –

[JOE KLEIN (?): Right.

DAVID GERGEN: Campaign rather than what are we going to do when it's over so we have some clear sense of what the choices are.

ALEX JONES: John Podhoretz.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Well I don't think that that is, that your description is entirely true though I do believe that it is true that if it is perceived that the swift boats was the turning point of the election, that the rage, that the extent to which let's say Bush wins, that ordinarily one – elections have, if you'll excuse the vulgarity, a kind of orgasmic effect in that they come to a climax and then people kind of calm down for a considerable period of time because you can't keep that level of tension going and there is a release in the election. That will not happen if this is what is perceived and then the rage against Bush will be sort of, will be, will continue. Which is – it's hard to imagine in the sense that one would have thought that a lot of it would have burned out by now simply because it was so hot.

Having said that, the one thing that I do not agree with is that I think that part of the reason that the coverage is empty is that Kerry has run an empty campaign. I think Bush – the election to some extent is a referendum on Bush's presidency, on the war in Iraq, on his conduct of the war on terror. In that sense we do know what he is –

MAN: Do we?

JOHN PODHORETZ: Had four years.

MAN: Do we, do we know what he's going to do?

JOHN PODHORETZ: No, hold on. He has had four years in which he has acted and the people can judge in some sense what he will do in unforeseen, with the unforeseen based on what he has done. And that is how the election

will be perceived if he loses is that they judge that he was not, that he had made wrong decisions and that he was . . . In this sense what Kerry, it is, it is, this is what I was saying about his failure this month.

It is Kerry's role to draw sharp divisions between him and Bush to say I will do this differently, I will do that differently. Not I will allow you to bundle your health care coverage or I will allow you to buy drugs from Canada. Which is all well and good as a kind of policy prescription on something but does not deal with the fact that we have 130,000 men in Iraq and that there's a nuclear Iran coming and all that. That is Kerry's responsibility. He is the challenger. Clinton put [OVERLAPPING] divisions between and Bush and triumphed as a result.

[JOE KLEIN (?): I think we have –

[ALEX JONES (?): You said he had middle class tax cut, right.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Right.

[ALEX JONES (?): Then he raised taxes. [LAUGHS]

JOHN PODHORETZ: Right, right but it's a true [UNINTEL] line division.

[ALEX JONES (?): No he didn't. No he didn't. Clinton didn't.

JOE KLEIN: I think we're not being entirely fair to Kerry. I think he's really laid out a very detailed domestic policy agenda. And I think that there are two big overriding issues in this election. One is obviously how do you prosecute the war against Islamist radicalism? And the other is the really unknowable and kind of mixed and questionable effects, positive and negative, of a global economy on the American economy, especially on, you know, people in the

manufacturing sector. Kerry has addressed that, not tremendously to my satisfaction but he's addressed it in detail.

Bush has yet to produce any sort of domestic policy agenda for a second term and so we're not having a debate on that. And on the war John is absolutely right. I think that Kerry has a real responsibility not so much to say that what he will do differently in Iraq because you can't know that until you take over. But he does have a responsibility to say to Bush, "Why on earth did you do that?"

JILL ABRAMSON: I want to just [SEGUE (?)] from a kind of emerging consensus here that swift boats is this election's turning point. You know we haven't even had the Republican convention.

JOE KLEIN: That's exactly right.

MAN: Right.

JILL ABRAMSON: It's Sunday before the convention. The debates are coming. We're falling into that sort of speeded up cycle trap that we've all just bemoaned.

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

JOE KLEIN: I think that David just threw that out as an aside. I think that what he was –

DAVID GERGEN: [UNINTEL]

JOE KLEIN: I think that the main point that he was making was that you're going to have an awful lot pissed off people.

JILL ABRAMSON: [OVERLAPPING] I'm just saying well we vowed in 2000 as we were all surprised the degree to which lots of voters were engaged by the debates and we actually learned a lot about George W. Bush and Al Gore during the debates. And –

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

JILL ABRAMSON: You may still see a lot of what you're yearning to hear unfold –

JOE KLEIN: Right.

JILL ABRAMSON: In the general election period to come.

JOE KLEIN: I think we'll have two or three turning points between now and the election. But his point was a different one, which is how do we –

JILL ABRAMSON: [OVERLAPPING] And at least three more orgasms.
[LAUGHTER]

MAN: It's all foreplay until [LAUGHTER OBSCURES]

AL HUNT: I just hope that Joe Klein's grandchild arrives – [LAUGHTER]
It's the only reference I'm going to make to this –

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

AL HUNT: You know, you know, you know, let me say one thing though. That I do want to associate myself with what Joe and David said I think and that is that it is incumbent upon candidates to make issues. There are a lot of important issues that we could write about. What are U.S. relations with China? I think ten years from now that may prove to be a bigger story than

Islamic terrorists. But you could do a long four part series on it. No one's going to read it or pay any attention to it if the candidates don't join the issue. And that's what campaigns are about. And I'm not trying to give the press a pass. We still ought to do important pieces. We ought to try to hold their feet to the fire.

JILL ABRAMSON: The *Times* had a whole full page story on China in Saturday's paper.

AL HUNT: And you know people all over 7th Avenue have been talking about it.

JILL ABRAMSON: [UNINTEL] I know, I know.

[LAUGHTER]

JOHN PODHORETZ: . . . dissent, there is, the idea here is people float a lot of garbage in the, you know, in the lower depths as you called them and some things float up and some things don't. And this is why, not to go back to the swift boats, but if you had [LAUGHTER], no but if you had told . . . It comes as a shock and a surprise to me that the swift boat story worked in the way that it worked. Because it could just as easily not have happened. But it did.

And what you then have to do is try to figure out why as opposed to bemoaning that it did. And I don't think that the way that people covered it in the month of August was – there might have been two or three days that were disreputable, that there was too much breathless coverage. But as a whole, as a whole, the notion that the purpose of the media, let's say, is to sort of put out a fire that is being set, a populist fire that is being set I think is a misunderstanding of the role of the press which is to report on events and gathering, as things that are gathering.

ALEX JONES: In the 2000 election by this time Al Gore had been sort of being cut with things that identified him as the liar, as the guy who exaggerated. That became his sort of meta-narrative. George Bush was something else at that time. Have we arrived now at this moment, albeit in August, at the meta-narrative identification of who these two candidates are in shorthand that is sort of dominating the campaign?

JOE KLEIN: No I don't think that the identification of Al Gore as a liar is one of the things that I really remember about what turned the 2000 election. It was the fact that three different Al Gore's showed up at the three different debates, you know, that made it pretty inevitable to me that he wasn't going to win.

ALEX JONES: Well that may be but the way he was covered in the media, that was something that was built in it seemed in, certainly in many, many stories that were on the campaign. I mean it was something that was repeated again and again.

JOE KLEIN: [OVERLAPPING] . . . as big as this. I think that this is somewhat different, the swift boat thing is different because, you know, there's an essential truth to most negative advertising even if it's despicable. George Bush put \$100 million dollars or \$90 million dollars up against John Kerry and the liberal 527s put it up against Bush. And what were they saying? Bush was saying essentially Kerry'll tilt toward a less macho posture overseas and he'll be a little bit more amenable to raising your taxes, both of which are essentially true.

What the liberals were saying was that Bush is essentially too macho overseas and he's not paying enough attention to poor people, both of which is essentially true. But what happened with the swift boats, what put it in a different realm was that it was an unprecedented personal attack on a

candidate's war record. I cannot remember – the only other time I can remember that happening –

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] Bush went AWOL? What, didn't perceive it?

AL HUNT: That's not a war record, John.

[LAUGHTER]

JOE KLEIN: The only –

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] The chairman of the Democratic –

AL HUNT: [OVERLAPPING] I mean they may have been fighting in Mississippi but I don't know who the hell else they were fighting.

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] . . . veterans. The chairman of the Democratic party called the president of the United States a deserter. That wasn't unprecedented?

AL HUNT: Not a war record, John.

JOE KLEIN: You know, John, if and when – and we may well find out just exactly why George Bush didn't take that medical exam – I'll be against making that into a huge story as well. But I think that when you have something like a bunch of guys who have good war records, as you said, calling into question another man's war record it is unprecedented and it is, it's like slowing down for traffic accident. It's going to happen, it's going to be huge. So I wasn't surprised at all.

JOHN PODHORETZ: It happened in May and it didn't happen. They gave a press conference in May and it didn't take off –

ALEX JONES: Abu Ghraib didn't happen the first time either.

JILL ABRAMSON: Right, true.

MAN: That's true too.

DAVID GERGEN: I don't think a meta-narrative as you call it has taken hold yet. But there is a meta-narrative that's developing. And if you're Kerry you have to be worried about it because the campaign started with a president, incumbent, who had basically staked his presidency on tax cuts and Iraq. And neither one is working out as well as he hoped. And it becomes harder to win the presidency when you're in that situation. You can change the subject or you can do, try to do two or three things: you can defend what you've done and make the best case as he will Thursday night and you can also discredit the other guy. So the people decide well maybe the tax cuts and Iraq didn't work so well but I'm not very comfortable with this other guy and therefore I'm going to stick with what I've got.

And in the last few months they have successfully raised questions about the steadiness of John Kerry, whether he's a flip-flopper as they – and now they've inserted questions about his veracity into the campaign. And it has put a cloud over Kerry's campaign. I just think that that's obvious to everybody and the challenge for Kerry is now how he transcends this, how he jumps over it.

AL HUNT: David, you know we were, Joe and I were at a dinner the other night and Haley Barbour the governor of Mississippi was there and he said, "If this campaign, this election is about John Kerry George Bush wins." And someone said, "How about it it's about George Bush?" And he thought for a minute and he said, "If it's about George Bush, George Bush carries

Mississippi.” [LAUGHTER] And so I think you’re absolutely right. If it’s about John Kerry – and that’s what they want to do. They want to make this about John Kerry.

DAVID GERGEN: That’s right. And they’ve done a lot better than anybody thought.

ALEX JONES: David Gergen, Joe Klein has talked about the – in today’s *Times* this morning there was an article about the fact that George Bush apparently does read the newspapers. He gets up early in the morning and reads them and reacts to them. And when he saw that John Kerry has said that he would have voted even knowing what he knew now for Iraq, George Bush, the instinctive political guy, the smart political guy, the guy who really does seem to have a genuine sense of politics said, “Aha, he’s made a mistake.” My question: can John Kerry change his mind about whether he would do something different or it simply going to make him a flip-flopper again if he does?

DAVID GERGEN: Whoa. You mean if he takes a third position?

ALEX JONES: If he said, “You know . . .”

MAN: At this point it’s like 12.

ALEX JONES: “Upon reflection I have decided that if I had known now what I...”

AL HUNT: No.

JILL ABRAMSON: I think you’ve just walked into Joe’s compound sentence problem.

AL HUNT: He can't do it.

[OVERLAPPING VOICES]

JILL ABRAMSON: That's Kerry's problem on Iraq. His position is an [UNINTEL], now it's becoming a run on sentence instead of a compound sentence.

AL HUNT: [OVERLAPPING] He can't touch that, Alex. What he can do, however, is something Joe alluded to a few moments ago. He can tell us a lot more about what he would do with this mess.

JOE KLEIN: Yes.

AL HUNT: And I don't think he can go back and say I would have voted differently or I regret that – I think that would be, you know, I'm sure it would be stupid. But that doesn't mean he doesn't have some responsibility to tell us what he's going to do.

JOHN PODHORETZ: But there is a problem. There is a problem in what Kerry has told us thus far and that he will have to change. That is to say what Kerry says is he will by mystical, magical means essentially get the French and Germans to participate in the war in Iraq which all reasonable people understand is not going to happen.

JOE KLEIN: That's an oversimplification.

DAVID GERGEN: I agree with that.

JOE KLEIN: He isn't talking so much about the French and Germans as he is about the Saudis and the rest of the neighbors.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Well I – I mean we could have a debate. All I'm saying is he has said that he will get greater international participation in Iraq, which is he wishes as he has also said to sort of pull American forces back at the earliest possible opportunity, that's an oxymoron. The idea that people will go in and take over for us when we're pulling back. In this sense he has plenty of time, I think, to revise, to deepen and revise that sort of like I think was a kind of somewhat cheap effort to kind of play at bring the troops home and make foreigners handle this cause we're tired of it.

He can make a much more sophisticated, much more serious case about Iraq and he has a ready audience in this room and this room and people on this stage have a great deal to do with, or some do, have a great deal to do with the way the agenda is set. Kerry's, what is to Kerry's benefit is that if he gets his campaign on the right track he has the benefit of having, I think, a more sympathetic audience than Bush has.

JOE KLEIN: Can I say that Kerry's statement about his vote I believe will cause him far more damage in the long run and may have even cause him damage in the short run over the last two weeks than the swift boats will. And secondly, I'll perform a public service here since I've spent all too much time doing this over the last couple of years, telling you exactly what he meant. He says that he would have voted the same way on Iraq because he believed that the president should have the power to go to war. This is yet another Kerry micronano nuance of – he's not saying that he would have gone to war. He's just saying that the president should have the power to go to war.

And I just, you know, with the stakes this large and with the issue this big, I mean it's quite possible that this decision to go into Iraq has launched us on a new path to a 50, 100 year religious war. It's quite possibly and I've heard prominent Republicans say this, prominent Republicans who are members of the first Bush administration, say that it was the stupidest decision an American president has made since Woodrow Wilson left Paris in 1919. I

think that Kerry cannot talk about what's going to happen next. But damn well have to talk about how we got to this moment and how this decision was made and whether there were another, whether there was another option.

ALEX JONES: How can he do that, Joe?

JOE KLEIN: He can do it by talking about it?

ALEX JONES: But I mean do you really believe that he made that decision on that tiny point?

JOE KLEIN: Oh, I'm sure he did.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Oh, come on. Wait, wait, hold on. He made the decision to vote for the authorization for war?

JOE KLEIN: Oh, no, no, no. The decision to say that a few weeks ago. The reason why he made the decision to go to, to vote for the war; very simple, in term, you know, I . . .

JOHN PODHORETZ: He was running for president, that's why.

JOE KLEIN: He was running for president.

JOHN PODHORETZ: He presumed that the war would be a cakewalk.

JOE KLEIN: It was a political, it was a political vote and I thought a wrong one.

ALEX JONES: We're going to go to questions in just a moment but before we do very briefly I want to raise another question that affects all of reporting, political especially, and that is the question of access to information and

whether the courts are going to protect anonymous sources in the future. And what this administration, what the Bush administration II if it comes to that is going to do in that regard? Jill, do you have a thought on that?

JILL ABRAMSON: I do and I think that the trend is in a very alarming direction. I think the proliferation of leak investigations, of subpoenas going out to reporters and all of that is increasing. And especially in the CIA leak case that's unfolding now the kind of, I think, coercive releases that officials in the government have been asked to sign which say they're relieving reporters of their duty to protect them, that all of this is really going to make the information flow between government officials and reporters who have the very hard task of covering Washington these days actually inform readers which is the heart of the matter.

And B, during the time I was Washington Bureau Chief of the Times at the beginning of this administration the level of secrecy, the decrease in freedom of information, the putting routine things that used to be posted on government websites, pulling them down, that that happening at the same time only adds to my worry. I think it's a really big issue. I think it's one that merits more coverage.

ALEX JONES: John Podhoretz.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Well I, I find that the leak, the CIA leak case is a fascinating example of ways in which – the leak case and the Joseph Wilson story and his wife and all this is a fascinating example of the way in which stories get away from everybody. That is to say I think we're now at a point at which Wilson published his op-ed, the articles were written about his wife's standing, the leaks, the leak investigation started, we are now, we now have the senate intelligence committee saying that Wilson lied, affirmatively lied to them, to reporters about what he knew to be the case in information that was

passed between him and the CIA and Niger and the Italians and that sort of thing.

And we have, I think it's, I understand that your query is largely about what will happen with secrecy. I think there is a secondary issue here which is in a highly politicized atmosphere when Wilson's charge that Bush, you know, that the White House knew that the uranium from Africa, the sentence in the State of the Union address, was knowing false and stuck in it anyway, was a hinge moment in the course of the sort of public relations problem for the presidency. That is where the sort of Bush lied about the war thing got started.

JILL ABRAMSON: It isn't just a public relations problem, his own CIA warned against putting that in the –

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] No, no, no, I'm just saying –

ALEX JONES: [OVERLAPPING] Let's not, let's not get into the who shot –

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] His State Department actually –

ALEX JONES: The issue, the issue is secrecy though. The issue is access to information no matter what your politics that comes from sources that you have to protect. Is that something that is now, as Jill seems to think, going to be much more difficult and is it going to have an affect on how news is going to be reported? And is it going to feed this whole idea of a media that is going to be of one side or other of assertion rather than fact.

AL HUNT: Well there's two distinct issues here and both, I think, the trends are very bothersome. I agree with Jill totally. I think these cases and I think the question of reporters' privilege I think is really being endangered and I think it's probably complicated by the changing nature of our business that we talked about earlier. But it's a very, very, very alarming thing.

The second issue, which is a different issue actually, is secrecy. This is the most secretive administration we've ever had. Jill, when she was the bureau chief, her paper, Adam Clymer I think did the piece, did a –

JILL ABRAMSON: Right.

AL HUNT: Wonderful piece a couple of years ago. It's just remarkable the stuff that these people will not release. And we don't do a very good job of day in and day out of pointing that out. Cause it, and moreover it seems to work. So therefore I think the message to the next group, whether it's Republicans or Democrats, is let's be even more secretive.

JOE KLEIN: That's really, really [COUGH OBSCURES]. Could I just make a suggestion that when we go to questions Floyd Abrams it out there. He represented our reporter Matthew Cooper and *Time Magazine* in this and I'd really like to hear what he has to say on this issue. That's number one. Number two, we're at war and it may not exactly be the war that George Bush thinks it is but we really are at war and in times of war I think that there is call for the government to be more secretive than they might otherwise be. That's number two.

But number three is that in the midst of a war for the White House to blow the cover of a non-official cover, a NOC, Valerie Plaine who we know was involved in issues of nuclear proliferation, which as Graham Allison who is out there has written, this is the greatest threat that we face. For the White House to blow her cover is an act of, is one of the most outrageous things that I have seen in this administration and President Bush could find out yesterday who did it and he has chosen not to.

ALEX JONES: Let's open it up to questions. May I ask Floyd, where are you? Yeah. Would you step to the mike first. You're invited to step to the mikes and address the panel if you'd like.

FLOYD ABRAMS: Sure. Let me first express my agreement with Jill. I think we're at a time that the press is more potentially limited as one looks down the road in terms of its coverage, particularly in Washington, than at any time in recent years. I say potentially because we've had an anomaly in the sense that in 1972 the Supreme Court wrote its only opinion so far on confidential sources. We lost. But since then most courts have held that there is at least some balancing to be done, some serious balancing, before the press has to reveal such sources.

And we've also had a situation where until recently we really didn't have leak investigations going on in which journalists were called. I represented Nina Totenberg, for example, when the senate commerce committee I think it was authorized an individual to be the leak investigator. And Pat Moynihan said, "There'll be blood on the floor of the senate before this committee will give him subpoena power to subpoena a journalist." How we miss him. And where we are now, it seems to me, is that we have a number of leak investigations which are known and a number I have to say which are not known because leak investigations are often attendant to grand jury proceedings so by their nature they're secret.

But we have more going on now by the way of leak investigations, more threats to journalists being jailed and more lawyers like myself in a position where we're able to do less for our clients than we would like to because the law isn't always as supportive as we'd like. And what's going to happen because of that? I know of one journalistic entity, not in New York, which has already started instructing its journalists that they have to behave differently by not promising confidentiality even in circumstances which I think we would all agree it should be promised. I'm not talking about the promiscuous or overuse

of confidentiality. I'm talking about confidentiality in which bipartisan people across the board would agree it was really worth it, the grant.

Cause at some point if there's no protection for confidential sources of journalists, journalists are going to have to stop promising confidentiality. We cannot have a system which is totally dependent on journalists going to jail. If it were anomalous enough so it happened once every five or ten years, you could live like that. It's untidy but you could live like that. But if we wind up, as I think we could, with a number of journalists in jail at the same time and no way out, no soon way out at least, I think journalistic organizations are going to have to and will start to have their inside lawyers give them instructions which will significantly cut down on the ability of the American public to learn what's going on and particularly in Washington. I think Washington coverage will change if the law doesn't change in our favor.

ALEX JONES: Thank you. Thank you, Floyd. John?

JOHN [BRADEMÁS (?): I yield myself such time as I may consume. That's a very inside comment.

[LAUGHTER]

JOHN [BRADEMÁS (?): You've talked about the presidential race appropriately but nobody said much about congress. In my day, a phrase my wife has told me not to use, Democrats were able to work constructively with Republicans in congress to write legislation. That sense of comity and cooperation seems utterly to have broken down in Washington with polarization being the phrase to describe it. I'd be interested in any comments that the panel may have to make on the possible impact of the elections in restoring some sense of cooperation between Democrats and Republicans on capital hill.

AL HUNT: Oh I think it'll probably go the other direction, John, I'm afraid. What's interesting is that the Times you were talking about there were some really incredibly divisive issues going on in America, the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement and other things, and yet still that comity would sometimes prevail. Which makes me think – I hate to use this term today in front of David Ellwood – but Floyd mentioned Pat Moynihan a moment ago and Pat Moynihan one time said that academic politics were so bitter cause so little was at stake.

And I think some, that's somewhat reminiscent of what's involved over the last five or ten years. Certainly the war on terrorism is a huge issue, I don't mean that. But they're fighting over such little, really, really just chicken shit issues is the dominant theme in this congress. And I'll be stunned if that changes with this election. It may in fact be exacerbated.

JOE KLEIN: I'd, what I'd really like to see – I'm a big fan of divided government. I would like to see the senate go back to the Democrats merely to give them the leverage that would be needed to get some things done, to at least to cut some deals. As long as one party has both houses of congress in this atmosphere –

[AL HUNT (?): And the supreme court.

JOE KLEIN: And the supreme court. But we're talking about congress here. You're not going to get any kind of movement on larger issues. I think that if Democrats have a little bit more leverage, you know, that would be the case –

[AL HUNT (?): You're assuming Bush wins.

JOE KLEIN: I mean I, I think that when the Democrats had controlled the congress for as long as they did it became one of the most corrupt, disgusting

places imaginable and the Republicans are taking off in that exact direction. I think at this point we need divided government.

DAVID GERGEN: What's one cure for this, John, as you know – aside from changing the personality – is if candidates campaign more clearly about what they plan to do. A candidate can then, the winning candidate can claim a mandate. I thought the last really good election in the country in that sense was the Carter vs. Reagan campaign back in '80. Both candidates laid out very clear paths of where they wanted to go and Reagan could claim a mandate he was able –

MAN: [OVERLAPPING] [UNINTEL]

DAVID GERGEN: What's that? Well but it was, but it was, but at least it was a choice. Johnson presented a choice in '64 and he had a mandate after he won in '64 to go forward with the Great Society programs and we had an enormously productive period, civil rights and other things. The – and it strikes me that to go back to what we were originally talking about, not only do we have a polarized congress, not only do we have people feeling that the election may be won on grounds other than what it should be won on, but when candidates are relatively quiet about their plans and then the day after everything has to start up, it's much, much hard to get, to build consensus.

JILL ABRAMSON: I think the one counter – I agree that the trend is polarization. But an interesting example, counter example that I think also deals with the role of the press is, you know, one of the few bipartisan legislative big achievements was McCain-Feingold where –

[PHONE RINGS]

JOE KLEIN: [UNINTEL]

[LAUGHTER]

AL HUNT: Hey, Joe, do I have a story for you.

JILL ABRAMSON: Joe –

AL HUNT: Was that your bookie?

JILL ABRAMSON: How many centimeters?

JOE KLEIN: It's my wife, she's going to call me back.

JILL ABRAMSON: It's just McCain-Feingold and there I think in part I – during the years that I first really got, in the 80s, into the political fray of reporting I had the good fortune to be hired by my mentor and co-panelist Al Hunt at *The Wall Street Journal*. And the dream beat that I had was money and politics and in the late 80s there were really not that many journalists paying a lot of attention to the role of money and politics and Al had the foresight as bureau chief to say we're really going to invest in this and have an investigative reporter work on it.

And lo and behold, kind of over the next decade and the role of money and politics exploded and more and more journalists it became not so much a tangent but the main action. And I do think that the exposes, the money scandals that were largely exposed by the press, coupled with bipartisan work by two senators who really worked at it piece by piece. I'm not saying it's a panacea and the one thing we haven't gotten to in this discussion is, you know, 527s are the other big topic. We have the president actually using that word, the 527s, most, you know, a lot of voters actually know what they are. That that's like just one counter example of bipartisan legislative action where I think that press coverage of a real endemic problem in politics did help at least

resolve in a very flawed law but nonetheless one that came to terms with some of the abuses.

ALEX JONES: John.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[BEGINNING TO TAPE 1, SIDE C]

JOHN PODHORETZ: Very quickly, I mean I think this is yet again a situation in which the bemoaning of a phenomenon is all well and good but it doesn't take full measure of how rooted and deep rooted the phenomenon is. Which is to say that polarization is in part due to massive population shifts and decisions by American to live in what people have called sort of communities of commonality. That is to say that people used to live cheek by jowl, Democrats with Republicans. You had a state like New York where you had liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. You had liberal Republicans and say conservative Democrats in the house upstate, you had comparable things in the south and that the migrations of the last 20, 25 years have caused people who have like minded ideological and cultural interests to live in proximity to each other thus deepening their own convictions.

Candidates who are elected by them – I mean the interesting things about Republicans in the house is that you have massive numbers of Republicans in the house who are in districts, the same as Democrats but since Republicans are in power it matters, who don't even to feint interest in ideas or policies of the other side because they have a 90, their electorate is 90 percent with them on every issue. You were a congressman from south, you were a Democratic congressman from the south. Obviously that could not have obtained.

ALEX JONES: But hasn't that even within the individual party changed over time and become sort of more extreme.

AL HUNT: That's, Alex, cause you have a great scam called redistricting. It's a bipartisan scam and what they've done is – these, the elected politicians have made sure that as of right now today I can tell you with complete confidence who's going to win 400 of the 435 seats in the house. We don't have a competitive political system when it comes to congress anymore. And so in the house at least – I mean John is absolutely right, there is no incentive

at all to have any kind of relations with people of the other party cause then it affects your reelection.

ALEX JONES: Is there any way to create it? Is it possible?

AL HUNT: Well in the house if you wanted to change the redistricting, I think, John, that could help a great deal. But I doubt that's going to happen.

ALEX JONES: But what Jill was talking about was the role effectively of the media to force, to foster, to create an environment whereas McCain-Feingold happened. Is that something that the media has the power to do?

JOHN PODHORETZ: That's a very rare – I mean especially think about the, if you think about the time frame that you were talking about. You went on the story in the late 80s and the law was passed 14, 15 years later.

JILL ABRAMSON: Yeah.

JOHN PODHORETZ: I mean if you think about the money in politics and the corruption of the Democrats when they were in power, the check scandal, all the stuff that sort of started this ball rolling, it was 12 years, 13, 14 years before legislation was actually, it was actually passed.

ALEX JONES: Yes, ma'am.

WOMAN: Hi. I drove in from New Haven so I wanted to thank Ms. Abramson in particular for the wargasm comment. I think it's going to be a real hit at the parties later. [LAUGHTER] You have been bemoaning the phenomenon so to speak of stories that once would have been considered journalistic dregs are now on every front page and news channel and I was reminded of a story, a scandal in Chicago, which I read about in *The New York Times*. And you may or may not remember but it was sort of about this guy

who was running for senate and he had a divorce and some journalist went into his divorce records, which I believe were sealed, and it turns out that he was into sex clubs but she wasn't so they parted amicably. And there was this other fellow who was also running for senate and he was asked by a journalist to comment on – I don't know, what should we call it – floorgasms or something. And this would have been, you know, this would have been a terrific opportunity for him to just kill this other guy, Jack Ryan. And what Barak Obama, this gentleman, said was that this election is about public morality not private morality and I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment.

So I was wondering if you guys could talk about sort of the worth of private morality. I mean I think you should talk about it in the newspapers cause it's interesting and whatever. But I'm also reminded of a bumper sticker which I pass a few times every day in New Haven which says, "When Clinton lied nobody died," and I have a brother who's on his way to Iraq in a month or so. So, you know, [UNINTEL] was sort of, you know, gulp and sigh a little bit and then keep going.

ALEX JONES: Well what exactly is your question?

WOMAN: Comment on the worth of, or discussing private morality in an election when what – I think that we should be considered with public morality.

ALEX JONES: David Gergen and then John.

DAVID GERGEN: Well I may be wrong about this but I thought that the court records in the Ryan case were, there was a Freedom of Information Act kind of request.

JOHN PODHORETZ: Well they were sealed and then they were unsealed.

DAVID GERGEN: But they were unsealed by the judge –

JOHN PODHORETZ: [OVERLAPPING] Yeah, yeah. They were sealed by common agreement. That was the –

DAVID GERGEN: Right and so it was not something that I think that the press sort of pried open as a general proposition. They came out and I think that Ryan had to withdraw. I mean he was sort of forced –

AL HUNT: But the press did pry ‘em open.

DAVID GERGEN: The press did not pry them open.

AL HUNT: They did.

DAVID GERGEN: Oh they did but through legal order.

AL HUNT: Yes.

DAVID GERGEN: Through legal orders. So it was not a [UNINTEL], well... As a general proposition I have to say that I think we’ve become, over the last 20 years, entirely too preoccupied with people’s private lives and not enough concerned with their public morality and whether they’re moral leaders in that sense. You know, John, Martin Luther King, Jr., in my judgment was one of the strongest moral leaders we had in the 20th century here in this country and we basically did not go into his private life and reveal everything and that sort of thing and I think we were better served in the long run by that and I think he served the country enormously well. And I think there are many other examples to point to.

George Bush, I thought the trend line started going the other way a little bit. George Bush to a significant degree a free pass on the first 40 years of his life in the last campaign. People didn't go out – I mean they tried but for a variety of reasons it didn't become a major story. And I thought that was for the good. I thought we were starting to create a zone of privacy around candidates. Hillary Clinton has tried to create a little zone or privacy around herself which I think is entirely fair.

So as a general proposition I'd like to see us move away from prying into other people's private lives. But I think we ought to be a lot tougher on them about their public lives.

ALEX JONES: Very, very briefly, John.

DAVID GERGEN: That we're not doing. We're not holding people accountable for their lies and their mendacity as public officials, the way they cover things up, the way they don't live up to their responsibilities and we ought to be a lot tougher on that issue.

JOHN PODHORETZ: I just think very quickly, the Jack Ryan story is among the most indefensible things that has ever happened, I mean has happened in the last five to ten years simply in terms of what we know to be the case, which is that both people involved in the divorce wished the records sealed to protect their child. And media organs basically decided that the interests of a nine year old were as nothing to the release of this completely lurid and utterly, utterly meaningless and pointless information. It had nothing whatsoever to do with any public policy issue. And there was the interest of a small child involved and that it was, that a judge allowed it to be unsealed for reasons that are inexplicable to me. But I still think that that was a major breach of any kind of like rational humane conduct.

JOE KLEIN: Well I think that it was an inevitability after what we've seen, what we saw happen to Bill Clinton. That there are no bars anymore and in a way I gotta say that, to change the frame once again, I'm a pro-peccadillo journalist. I would much rather vote for somebody who has an interesting sexual history than someone who doesn't. [LAUGHTER] I think that that makes them far more in touch with the rest of us. I think that we have a long history. I think that presidents who've had interesting sexual histories have been far more effective presidents than those who haven't. [LAUGHTER]

ALEX JONES: And they make much better novels.

JOE KLEIN: Yeah, and, and yes they do make better novels. And I mean you don't want to vote for somebody who is a goody-goody all of his life and did nothing – and married his childhood sweetheart and did nothing else except be ambitious. You want to have someone who has intimate knowledge of the human condition which means our frailty. [LAUGHTER] So I think we really have to –

ALEX JONES: You're going to be great grandfather.

[LAUGHTER]

JOE KLEIN: That's it's time –

[LAUGHTER]

JOE KLEIN: It's time for the press – what I'm saying is that it's time for the press to grow up a little bit when it comes to this stuff.

AL HUNT: Joe, let it be noted Congressman John Brademas sat stoically silent during that entire discourse.

ALEX JONES: Final question. Yes, sir.

MAN: Yes, can you hear me okay.

SEVERAL: Yeah.

MAN: I'm sorry my question has no sexual content. The question has to do with the use of, the introduction of facts that support interpretation into a breaking news story. Now I noticed a couple of years, a couple of days ago we were informed by a very fine American novelist, Larry Heinemann, on the op-ed pages of the *Times* an important fact, which is that in the Vietnam War people did not put themselves in for a Purple Heart nor did they, did their commander who loved them put them in for a Purple Heart. The fact was that a medical corpsman, a medic, a medical officer and so forth made a judgment and they put the individual in for a Purple Heart. The other awards is a little more ambiguous.

The point is I'm making is that this is a little boring but it's a fact. I think Slate.com does a very useful thing with their explainer feature. But so you have a breaking story but there are certain facts that, whether it's labor statistics or whatever it is, they enable the citizen to quickly assess on their own what these charges and countercharges and so forth, how much substance there is. And I just wonder what's the obligation then of the news organization in that situation.

ALEX JONES: Al Hunt, let me give you the final word on that.

AL HUNT: No, I'm going to yield to the best, the best hire I ever made in my life, Jill Abramson, cause she's right in the front lines.

ALEX JONES: Okay, Jill.

JILL ABRAMSON: Well, yeah, I think your point speaks to the points I was trying to make earlier about the essential role of reporters and certainly reporters for my newspaper to deal in the world of facts and not yield the floor, so to speak, especially in the coverage of something as critical as an election to the world of opinion.

ALEX JONES: I think – I don't in any way mean to suggest that I don't completely embrace and endorse what you're saying – my question I guess ultimately that I leave you with is whether the facts can catch up with the assertions in the environment that we live in?

I want to thank this great panel. I want to thank you all for being here this morning.

[APPLAUSE]