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THE ROAD TO 2012 AND *GAME CHANGE**

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These are momentous times. Maybe not as momentous as the Civil War in the era of Lincoln, but these are pretty momentous times. Just in the period President Obama has been in office, we've seen overseas: the crisis in Japan, nuclear showdowns with North Korea and Iran, the movements for liberation in Northern Africa and the Middle East, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the War on Terror. There's a lot going on overseas, and there's a lot going on here at home as well. We've seen a period of intense polarization and conflict in Washington, which I'll talk a fair amount about. We've seen the passage of a healthcare law, one of the biggest pieces of legislation any of us have ever seen. And we've seen a crisis in this country of a pretty extreme nature regarding jobs—what I think is the biggest issue facing the country now, affecting not just the country and the world, but the communities, families and individuals in a way that is pretty important. All of this is happening in an environment of pretty intense change.

There have been two movements just in the last three years that are quite unusual in the modern era in terms of their intensity . . .

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and in terms of the impact on politics. The Tea Party movement, which helped Republicans do real well in the mid-term elections in 2010, is, I think, a moral movement in many ways. It is a movement that says we shouldn't be passing on to future generations debt and deficits that are unsustainable. While the Tea Party has become polarizing, in part because of the national mood that I will talk about today, again, I think it is great to see people go out into the streets and participate in democracy about something they feel strongly about. . . . I think another moral argument being made by people is the Occupy Movement. Income inequality in this country is unsustainable as a practical matter, but it is also, I think, a matter of morality to say that in a country like this we shouldn't have systems, to not only propagate but in some ways reinforce the income inequality, where so few have so much and so many have so little and there is a declining middle class. So, those are two movements of intense change, and they are part of understanding the political divide that we now have.

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First and foremost, this country has had great periods of division in the past, and it has had great periods throughout our history of pretty tough partisan politics of the kind of negative rhetoric aimed at our political leaders that is so pervasive now. I think there are two ways that it is different now than it has ever been, and those things really do matter quite a bit. They really do make this a crisis for the country and, something again, I think is interesting and important. One is, it is 24/7. It has never been that way before—Twitter, cable TV, talk radio, and internet. If you are someone who doesn't like Karl Rove on the right or Michael Moore on the left, you can go home or go wireless right in this room, and you can read about them and listen to negative things about them all day long. There is an ability to publish negative things through Twitter, and Facebook. Everyone can be someone who engages in negative attacks, and, if you want to be a consumer of that information, you can do it around the clock.

The other way that it is different than it has ever been is that those extreme voices on the left and the right are now at the center of our politics. In the old days, they were part of the fringe. There was a center of responsible voices of civil discourse. Now, the town square is dominated by propagandists and activists on the left and the right in a way that it has never been before. I call it the “freak show” of American politics, where Michael Moore on the left and Ann Coulter on the right have more influence about what citizens learn about what is going on in the country than most United States Senators.

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I think division matters, first and foremost, not because I don't like partisanship and not because I think we should squelch voices, but the “freak show” keeps us from solving our problems. It forces politicians and other people involved in our national life into tribal camps. It forces them to worry more about what people in their camp think of them, to worry more about, if you're a Democrat, attacks from the left, and, if you're a Republican, from the right, than in trying to find national consensus. While I'm an optimist about the country's future, even in the short term and certainly in the medium and long, we have a lot of challenges right now. As a practical matter, in Washington and in our state capitals [these challenges] are not being addressed because “freak show” politics dominate everything that is going on in America in terms of trying to meet those challenges. We face a lot of big issues—maybe none by itself as big as slavery—but we face a lot of big issues and challenges that need to be met, and I would suggest to you that we are not going to meet them, as we have seen over the course of the last three presidencies, until we can figure out how to become a less divided nation.

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So where did the “freak show” come from? Where did this current division that we are saddled with start? I think it started pretty much at the beginning of the Clinton era. President Clinton came in, and, for some reason, he is a polarizing figure.

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I think, for a time at least, we lost the imperial presidency.

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He would literally run into the Oval Office in his running shorts after workouts. He would show up at McDonald's. He had a casual way about him that is his natural self, but it served to, I think, diminish the majesty of the office in a way. He talked about this in an interview I did with him for an earlier book; he acknowledged that this was the case. In some ways, he reduced his power, his influence, and the influence of the office by behaving in a more casual way than his predecessors had done. The other thing that happened at that period that was extraordinarily important for creating the "freak show" was the rise in "new media." Again, it isn't a clean break. There was some "new media" before President Clinton took office and some of it has only developed since he has left office. It was the beginning of the internet, the beginning of more cable news, the beginning of the use of email, and it was the beginning of an electronic age where talk radio became a bigger deal, where the "freak show" had more outlets, more places to go, and lower barriers to entry for participation in the national conversation in a way that we had never seen before—a lot of which was directed towards going after the President.

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He was replaced by George W. Bush. I never thought I would cover a president more polarizing than President Clinton. By almost every metric academics use to measure polarization, President Bush was, but he was also president during 9/11, and 9/11 changed things just a little bit on these issues, at least for a time, because the country was so united. President Bush did a good job in the wake of 9/11, I think most people would agree, in trying to bring the country together. . . . National security and the role of the president protecting us came back, and I think has led to something that is under-

commented on, which is a pretty broad area of consensus in foreign policy.

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Again, I never thought I would see a president more polarizing than President Bush was; President Obama is even more polarizing. And there is an irony to that given that he ran, first and foremost along with trying to stop the war in Iraq, saying he would be different, he would be post-partisan, and he knew how to bring the country together. He's achieved a lot of his campaign promises, which is something he talks about regularly, and he's right about. He has not achieved the promise of bringing the country together. We are more divided now than we were under his predecessors. That is a real problem for him and for the country because if you cannot unite the country, at least for a period, then you cannot meet the challenges that are currently unmet across the board, like dealing with the healthcare law and energy, on immigration, on the tax code, on debt and the deficit, and on education.

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Now, what has the President done to try to deal with the "freak show," to try to bring us together, and to try to make us not a house divided? Not very much, as I said before. He's failed. First of all, he has failed because it is hard to do. These forces are as big and as powerful as the presidency is, although weakened from the Cold War period. It is hard to do and you have to spend a lot of time on it. It is not easy. It is not human nature for someone, even someone like Barack Obama, who has got a pretty thick skin, to want to reach out there to people who are attacking him every day, 24-hours-a-day, on Fox, Twitter, cable news, and talk radio. It is hard to do.

The second thing is he has become personally polarizing, just like his two predecessors. He is not the candidate of hope and change of just a few years ago, where a lot of Republicans I knew voted for him, raised money for him, talked about his promise of bringing the country together, talked about him being a post-partisan figure. . . .

He made a big mistake his first month in office; it is what I call the original political sin of his administration on this score. He wanted to pass the stimulus law in a big hurry. . . . As you'll recall, [the Democrats] controlled the Congress at that point, both the House and the Senate. He dared Republicans to vote against it. His attitude was I'm popular, this needs to be done, if Republicans vote against this in mass, they will be punished politically because it will pass anyway with Democratic votes, the economy will get better and we'll get all the credit. Or he thought it was possible that the Republicans would be split; some of them would vote for it, and the Republican Party, very weak at that time, would become even weaker. They almost all voted against it. It passed, but the economy didn't get much better right away. The public didn't credit that law and the expense of spending \$800 billion with improving the economy, and it set in motion an attitude by the Republican Party of we should oppose this president because if we hang together we will succeed politically.

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So what can we do? First of all, we can lobby for good behavior.

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Second thing you can do is to remember the adage of "the personal is the political." If you are sitting around in one of your tribes – again we've got a mixed group here, but I suspect a lot of you spend more time in your tribe than cross-pollinating . . . While we can disagree—and we should—and have political debates, even partisan debates, it shouldn't be personal, and it shouldn't be done in a way that only reinforces people being in their own tribes rather than try to work together.

The final thing is being consumers because, while the politicians clearly play a big part in this, if you are smart consumers about media, you can really affect things. Just as politicians will go where the votes are and where public attitudes are, people in my business will go where the readers, viewers, and eyeballs are.

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What we need are neutral voices, voices that aren't liberally biased or conservatively biased, voices that actually give you facts. There is an extraordinary amount of skepticism from people on the left and the right who are hard-core "freak show" members about people in my business. There are people who will say that everything in *Time Magazine* is too liberal, everything in *Time Magazine* is too conservative. We need—any democracy needs—voices in the media that hold powerful interests accountable to the public interests without fear of favor; that aren't partisan, that are fact-based; that are well-funded; that can stand up to the government, the labor unions, and the corporations; and that file Freedom of Information Act requests with foreign bureaus. So as consumers of news, don't reward only partisan organizations. Don't reward only places that are only based on invective. Reward places that do serious work. We have only a few of these left in America right now, and if there aren't consumers that support them, they are going to disappear, and we'll be left only with "freak show" groups.