

Grano Series – Race to the White House

The 4th annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the key issues on the 2008 US election from four different perspectives

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An election for the ages

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The following is an edited transcript of David Gergen, one of America's foremost political commentators. He teaches politics at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and has worked for four US presidents

I have been asked to address the topics of American politics and where we find ourselves leading up the election in November. I must tell you, though, that I've been around this track probably too long. This is my tenth presidential campaign—my tenth presidential campaign! I started out working in the trenches for candidates, and more recently have been in studios, kibitzing from the sidelines.

Here we are, ten campaigns later, and I'm absolutely fascinated, riveted, by this race. It is the most interesting, most exciting race we've had in half a century in the United States. I would add that it's also probably the most important election we've had in half a century. And for me, the serious question about this race is not who wins, but can the winner govern? Can the winner lead?

I honestly believe that the next president will face the toughest challenges of any new president in more than half a century. You have to go all the way back to Franklin Roosevelt in March of 1933 to find a president who inherited a more daunting set of challenges. Many of the problems we're facing now have been around for a long, long time, but we've been unable to solve them. We have delayed, we've been in denial, we've been divided. Our society—your society to a significant degree, but our society far more—has found it almost impossible, for example, to reach agreement on a comprehensive energy plan that also is respectful of the environment. We just haven't done it. I was there in the early 1970s when OPEC raised its head and tried to strangle the world economy, and I wrote some of those early presidential speeches calling for energy

independence. That was our battle cry, back in the early 1970s. Well, those speeches were very successful, weren't they? We're about twice as dependent today as we were then!

But energy is only one of several issues that have been kicking around for a long, long time. And now the bills are coming due and we have to act. We no longer have the luxury of arguing. The time has come for action. And whether the United States is going to be up to that while also dealing with the other myriad issues that are on the table—like nuclear proliferation, Iran, Iraq, and all the rest—is very much open to question.

In my judgment, each of the individuals now running for president would make a very fine chief executive in ordinary times. I think we're blessed indeed in this race to have winnowed the field down to three candidates who would each, if elected, break a record. We have a former POW. We've got a woman. We've got an African-American. And they're all people of character. They're all people of better judgment than the incumbent. They're all people whom I think have a lot of drive. But it's not yet clear to me that any one of them can rise to the heights that are going to be needed. I don't think we need ordinary leadership in the next four to eight years. I think we need extraordinary leadership. And one of the things this campaign must do is help us sort out who can be extraordinary. It's a testing of the candidates, a chance for us to get a better sense of who these people are.

As bumpy and as difficult as these last few weeks have been for Barack Obama, for example, at least he's being tested in a very public way, and we're getting a better sense of who this man is. Does he have the steel? Does he have the toughness, the inner toughness, that is ultimately required in this job? I don't think we have the definitive answer yet, but we may be getting close. In some ways, this long campaign has been good for all of us. Now, where are we with the race? I'd like to spend a bit of time on where the race may be going where it may not be going, and the challenges that are ahead.

This is a race that, according to all historical lessons, should be won by the Democrats by somewhere between five and ten points, which would be a near landslide. We have a situation in which one party has held the White House for eight years, and in which the incumbent is not running. We've had five such elections since the 1950s. In four of those elections, the out-of-power party has won. Only when Reagan was president did the "in" party win again, and that's because Reagan was so popular at the end

of his presidency that the next election, when Bush Sr. won, was in effect a referendum on Reagan.

Historically, then, this should be a lay down. But you've got other factors to add into the mix—factors that work in the Democrats favour. This particular president, for example, has been such a huge disappointment that many people who voted for him eight years ago have moved from a sense of disappointment to befuddlement to resentment to deep anger about what he is doing to some of the institutions that we've watched other presidents labour hard to build. He's ripped apart relationships, destroyed America's good reputation in so many parts of the world, and has left unattended so many problems that demanded response. And then there are the wars he's going to leave behind.

There's a survey out now that says only 27% of the country approves of the Republicans, of Bush. Only 21% approve of his economic policies. And 73% of the country—a very, very high number—believes that the country is on the wrong track. We haven't seen numbers like since the end of the last Bush One administration, which brought Clinton into office.

So what you have, then, is a set-up that calls for a Democratic victory. And if you think this is just temporary, that people are just angry about the war, it goes far deeper than that. Some observers both in the U.S. and abroad are very concerned about trade and the populism we see in America. I take this populism very seriously, and I think it does have repercussions and importance to Canada. But that populism is rooted in something deeper. We seem to be in the early stages of a fundamental change in western economics. Globalization is driving up the rewards for those on top and driving down the returns for those in the middle or at the bottom. And the economic growth record under George W. Bush is the lowest, year to year to year, since Dwight Eisenhower. We've had the lowest record of job increases since the Second World War. Under President Clinton poverty went down. Under President Bush poverty has gone up. Under President Clinton average income went up. Under George W. Bush it has gone down significantly. That has left a lot of scars. And it's left people feeling very, very pushed. It's one of the reasons we're seeing this populism. But it also has opened the door to a Democratic victory. And yet even with all these factors in play, we find that John McCain is running even—in a statistical dead heat with both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

My own sense is that when a Democratic nominee does emerge, there is going to be a movement toward that Democrat and the party will then open an eight- to ten-point lead. And the big question is, can they

hold it. It's not clear they can. But we're in an unnatural part of the campaign right now. For the Democrats this is sort of the nadir. The fight is very tough, very messy, very bloody. And McCain can be off, unscarred, standing above it all, unchallenged in many ways. I think when the real fight starts, you're going to find arguments being made that will make John McCain's job a lot tougher. I continue to believe the Democrats are likely to win this, but it's possible John McCain could win. I think the odds are about sixty-forty in the Democrats' favor, but those odds started out greater. Those odds have narrowed. For the Democrats, then, this has been a totally unexpected battle.

We all thought Hillary Clinton was going to close the deal back in February. *She* thought she was going to close the deal back in February. But for reasons that remain mysterious, she has run a lousy campaign. She may be ready to be president on Day One, but she was not ready to be a candidate on Day One. And that's surprising. I think even Bill Clinton shares that assessment. The Clintons were not prepared for the length of this campaign, or at least for how popular Barack Obama would turn out to be. . I think when Clinton got into this she was so certain of winning, that her team didn't plan it out beyond February 5. They weren't ready to go beyond Super Tuesday. They did not take the caucuses seriously. They thought they could just sweep the big states. I don't know who was doing the math, but it turns out the caucuses are pretty darn important when it comes to actually getting pledged delegates. And Obama, because he was such an underdog, started out with only 20% name recognition against this overwhelming favourite. He had to fight everywhere in order to have any chance at all.

Let's take a minute on the system—this peculiar system for counting the vote. On Super Tuesday, just to use one example, there were elections all across the country. One of those that we in the so-called "commentariat" kept our eye on was New Jersey—a big industrial state, a critical state in the overall scheme of things. And Hillary Clinton campaigned hard. She had John Corzine, the governor, campaigning hard for her. Barack went in and tried to compete, but he couldn't beat her. She won a significant victory—eight to ten points. So you would think she gets a rich harvest of delegates, right? Not when you win by eight to ten points. Delegates are awarded in an essentially proportional way, so she didn't end up with that many more delegates than he did.

Meanwhile, on the same day, the state of Idaho has a caucus. Now almost nobody, unless you're a fisherman, goes to Idaho. Clinton didn't go to Idaho, but Obama did. He went out and campaigned in Idaho and he swept the caucuses by a huge margin. And when you allocated the

delegates from the two states, Idaho and New Jersey together, he actually came out one delegate ahead.

The Clinton campaign hadn't figured that out. They conceded these caucuses, and that gave Obama a significant lead in pledged delegates, which has put Clinton in a very awkward situation. I think they "misunderestimated," to use a George Bush term, Barack's appeal. They didn't see it coming, and I think what we're seeing now is a lot of resentment within the Clinton campaign about this upstart. Why is he challenging us? We're the legitimate heirs. He hasn't earned this. There's a deep-seated feeling among the Clintons that Obama can't win, that he will be a threat to the future of the party, and that they have to stop him. That's their obligation: to stop him.

No one mistakes the fact that the Clintons think it's their obligation—and their right, their entitlement—to have the White House. And so in going after Obama recently, Clinton became a street fighter. Obama has tried to stay above it all, and as a result, she's made up some ground against him. But she's also hurt herself. She's driven up her own negatives up even as she's driven up his.

There are a lot of people who look at this and say that a woman faces a double bind here. Of course, an African-American male in the white culture of the United States, will also be stereotyped, so let's address that first. Obama has had to break out of that stereotype and show the voters that he's not lazy, that he's smart, that he could actually be a football coach, or a quarterback. He's had to fight against all the old myths, the racial prejudice and so forth that roll around out there. But once he does break out—once he shows the voters that he's not dangerous, that he's going to work in a partnership—people flip on this question of race. Suddenly they see him as acceptable.

I know many people who feel proud to have Obama in this race. I'm from the white south. I grew up in North Carolina. For me, this race has a quality of redemption about it. For many of us who come from the south, who bear a sense of guilt about our past, voting to put an African-American in the White House is a powerful thing. It stirs me. It goes beyond the quality of the individual. As long as the person is qualified, that stirs me.

By contrast, I wanted to make a point about the double bind for a woman. For a woman, the stereotype is that she's going to be sort of go along, get along leader, a weak, nourishing, helpful, partner, co-partner or lower partner. She won't take charge, and she's probably not up to the

tough decisions that are required in the inner sanctums of government or corporate life. Therefore, she's probably not qualified. To break out of that stereotype, a woman has to show something else. She has to show strength and decisiveness. And when she does that, people think, "well, she's not that stereotype, is she?" But now, of course, she's a bitch. And she's caught in that trap. Many, many women get caught in that trap. So the reaction to Hillary's fighting has been, "well, it's okay that she fights, but I'm not comfortable with her in my living room."

And we need to take that seriously, because there's very much a living room test that goes into the selection of America's presidents. More than with any other position in our society, people apply a values and likability test to potential presidents. If they *like* you, they're much more willing to vote for you. "I like Ike" was the single most effective popular slogan in all of American political history. And his smile made a huge difference, as it did for Reagan. For many people, Clinton is tough but not likable. And that is getting in her way as she tries to close this deal.

And so here comes Obama out of nowhere—gifted oratorically, very smart, went to the Harvard Law School. While he was there a constitutional scholar named Larry Tribe—one of the foremost constitutional scholars in the country—was there too. And he's been telling people all about Barack—the first African-American editor of the Law Review, the smartest kid he ever taught. And that is working for Obama. There seems to have been a magic about him even in the beginning.

In recent times, however, we're seeing some things about Obama that we don't fully understand. He's going through a terrible vetting right now, and we're learning about some of the early associations he made that were, perhaps, mistakes. And Hillary got to him, tore him down some.

I had a friend who advised Obama very early on, before he got into this. Barack went to see this veteran of American politics—who has been in Washington, been in Chicago, and knows politics extremely well, knows the Clintons extremely well. And my friend told Barack, "Listen, the question is not whether you can take a punch, the question is whether you can throw a punch." I didn't understand that when I first heard it, but boy has it come back to help define what's going on now. There are a lot of people asking, can this guy throw a punch? Does he have what it takes to stand up to someone like Putin in a tough clinch? If he gets into it with Ahmedinejad, he may not be able to solve the problems just by talking. You may have to have somebody tougher at the table. And there are going to be a lot of situations where that kind of inner steel makes a big difference to leadership.

I think Obama's inspirational quality is marvelous, and the speech he gave after the first Reverend Wright episode broke was one of the best speeches since King's "I have a dream." It was so refreshing to have someone talk to us as if we were adults instead of having the cheesy, adolescent conversations we so often get in our national politics. But the question is still, is the guy tough enough to get the job done. Because there are times you can't make everybody come together around the same table and agree. There are times when some people lunge at you, times when you've got to be able to smack 'em down. And there are times that people, tough people, can become your enemies.

When Franklin Roosevelt was president he did a marvelous job rallying the country. He also acquired a great number of enemies. And in 1936, when he ran again, he said how proud he was to have these enemies. He liked the combat. He enjoyed the fisticuffs of politics. You have to enjoy the exercise of power. It's not just a question of getting there. The people who are best at this are the people who enjoy the exercise of power and also have strong values, and have a clear sense of what they want to achieve. And we don't know quite about the first part of this equation with Barack.

African-Americans will come to the conversation about who ought to get the nomination with some serious and difficult questions. They're going to say that, for a century or more you've been telling us that if we want to get ahead in the United States we need to come to the table, play by the rules, and work hard. And if we're diligent and play by the rules, we'll be properly rewarded. Now, African-Americans will say, "okay, we played by the rules, we got more votes, more delegates and more states, and you're saying you're not going to give it to Barack because he's black. Is that what you're saying?" Can you imagine how poisonous that is for the Democratic party, which relies heavily on the black vote? It's a very, very dangerous game to play.

And then there's the youth vote, which is also vitally important. We've had a real problem with civic disengagement with our youth, and yet, a great number of young people who have not voted in the past have voted this time out. We haven't seen anything like this kind of youth turnout since Kennedy. I've had busloads of students from the Kennedy School go to Pennsylvania, go to Ohio. They're going to North Carolina, they're going to Indiana. They really are caught up in this race. For the first time in a long time, we have a lot of young people very, very excited about this game.

If you're running the Democratic party you know how important this is. You know that, historically, if someone between the ages of say 18 and 26 votes for you for once, and then they vote for you or your party again four years later, they are likely to vote for your party most of their lives. One of the reasons that there are a lot of young people in the United States—in their thirties and forties—who are much more conservative than some of their colleagues is because of the Reagan influence. People who voted for Reagan twice have tended to remain pretty conservative.

So the Democrats have this chance with Obama to get people—young people—to vote Democratic. And if they get them a couple of times, it will be the basis for a new majority, a long-term majority. Are they going to throw out those young people? Young people are likely to turn very cynical if they think this is stolen from Obama. That's why this is a real problem, and why many, many Democrats fervently hope that Obama goes ahead and wraps this thing up. If it goes the other way, it's going to be a real mess.

I don't want to spend much time on McCain, but I will tell you he's riding high right now. People like him so much. There's no question he's the most likeable person in the race. He's the person you'd want to have dinner with first. He's fun, he's provocative, he's a little raunchy, he's irreverent, but he's got interesting values, and he comes from a long line of people who served with valour in the United States military. I was with John and Cindy McCain last summer. Three generations of McCain's have been to the naval academy. And they've got a son in the naval academy now. He's the fourth generation McCain. Last summer, they had a 17-year old kid last summer who had graduated from high school, who they assumed was going on to college. Then he went and signed up for the Marine Corps without their permission and without talking to them, which means he's going to Iraq. In fact, he's already been. He's home now, but he's going back. But the McCain's didn't want to talk about that. They just do not want to talk about their son. I think part of it is that they don't want to put him in trouble over there, but they also don't want to wear it on their sleeves. I think there is something noble about that.

What's particularly important is that this is a family in which the father would say we have to increase the troops knowing full well that his son is going to be on the line. That's something a lot of Americans respect. We don't have many people like this. Most of the men and women who voted to send people to this war are sending somebody else's kids, not their own. Oderno, who's just taking over for Petraus, is in the same situation. His son got his arm blown off over there, and Oderno's going back. Petraus has a son in ROTC who may go before this is over.

So McCain has got all these likeable qualities but, his policies, I think, are open to question, especially in foreign policy. It's not just Iraq and wanting to win. There's a legitimate argument about how long we should stay. But if Iran gets to the point of having a nuclear weapon, if we're faced with a choice between letting them have the weapon and enacting a policy of deterrence versus taking them out militarily, he's going to take them out. And that is not a choice that many officers in the United States Army want to make. They are very, very anxious not to get into a military conflict in Iran. They do not want a bombing campaign, because they do not think it will work, and they fear they will be dragged in over there.

So how do you get Iran to cooperate? Most serious analysts of the situation say if you've got to get Russia to help put pressure on Iran, that Russia is very, very important in this complex chess game. So what is McCain doing? McCain is picking a fight with the Russians. He gave a speech recently on the west coast saying that we should have a league of democracies, and that we ought to throw Russia out of the G8. And we ought to invite in Brazil and India, by the way leave, and leave out China You can't do that. If John McCain as president throws Russia out of the G8, you can kiss off the possibility they're going to be helpful on Iran.

And there are issues on the domestic front as well. George Bush cut taxes a lot and look at the growth rates we got. McCain wants to double that—without regard to the massive deficits. And by the way, he's for capping trade. At least he's not in denial on carbon and global warming. But in the same breath that he's proposing capping trade, he says, "let's have a holiday on tax payments for gasoline," which is exactly the wrong policy if you wish to reduce the amount of gasoline being used.

There is a lot on the policy side that I think will make John McCain a much more controversial figure once the focus turns away from the intra-squabbling on the Democratic side to this larger issues. I want to end where I began—on the challenges that lie ahead. They are immense. In the first year of the next presidency, one-half of the Oval Office desk is going to be stacked with all the messes and all the complications of the international scene—whether it's Iraq, Iran, or Pakistan. They will all be very, very difficult to deal with. On the other side of the desk will be the repercussions from the current economic squeeze. And we don't yet know how big those repercussions will be. We do know they're going to bedevil the next president. The Bush administration was expecting deficits of 400 million dollars this year. After only six months we're at 313 million. So the deficits are climbing, and that's going to have an enormous impact on the next president. That's Year One.

In Year Two, the Bush tax cuts expire and there could be a massive fight over revising the tax code. It always takes a lot of time to revise the tax code, but you have no choice. If you let the tax code expire, and you let all the taxes go back to where they were, you get the biggest tax increase since the Second World War. That's not going to happen. There's going to be a big fight to figure out where the adjustments will be made.

Year Three: the baby boomers start to retire in mass, the wave hits the shore, and our entitlement programs are all going to be under enormous pressure. We've not yet been able to revise our retirement program, and the next president is going to be under enormous pressure to do what no other president has been able to achieve.

And then Year Four—the Kyoto agreement expires. And not only is that going to mean dealing with energy and carbon in the United States, but it also has enormous consequences on how well the president leads internationally, especially with China and India. That's going to be a huge, huge requirement, and perhaps along with nuclear proliferation, is in many ways the transcendent issue that faces the next president.

So that's a massive, massive set of responsibilities. And that's why I think it's going to be very tough. Will the candidates be up to it? Are they going to be up to it? I'm just not sure. I'm just not sure. But I don't think you should write off the United States. We're a very resilient country. We have an economist, Charlie Schultz of the Brookings Institutions, who observed once that the U.S. is not very good when we have termites in the basement, but we're terrific when we have a wolf at the door. And there are a lot of wolves out there right now. And in that sense, I hope we will draw together after this very, very messy campaign. And if not, then we take refuge in Bismark's theory that God does look after fools, drunkards, and the United States of America. So we have hope. We always have hope.