

# **Teatro Series – Race to the White House and Beyond**

*The 2<sup>nd</sup> annual speakers series, held in Calgary at Teatro Restaurant, explores the key issues in the 2008 US election and an analysis post election*

April 29, 2009

## **State of Denial: Bush in the White House**

Bob Woodward

*This is an edited transcript of Bob Woodward's speech at Teatro Restaurant. Mr. Woodward is a highly acclaimed best-selling author. Along with Carl Bernstein, he received the Pulitzer Prize for breaking the Watergate story.*

**I** want to start by telling a story of having dinner with the former vice-president, Al Gore, in 2005. Now, because this is going to be an evening of candour, let me tell you that having dinner with Al Gore is unpleasant. There is not one damn fun thing about it. It is taxing. He's very passionate about what he believes. He's very sure that he knows all of the answers to any subject that might come up and he was grinding on me very hard about the first two books I wrote about Bush.

I've written 15 books going back to the Watergate books and four about Bush. My wife says if I write a fifth book about Bush she's going to shoot me. And I'm going to now write a book about Obama governing.

During this dinner with Gore, we got to the really interesting topic of what percentage of what goes on in a White House we know contemporaneously. This was 2005. He'd been the vice-president for Clinton for eight years, had an office in the West Wing, was in on all of the policy debates and discussions and so many books had been written about the Clinton presidency. I'd written three books about Clinton and hundreds of others had been written by 2005. There had been 24/7 coverage and endless magazine and newspaper articles. So I asked him how much of what went on of consequence or interest we now knew. He said, "One per cent." I died. I thought, only one per cent? And I confess to having had a very unclean thought. When he said one per cent I thought, is it possible there are that many women we don't know about?

Setting that aside, I was alarmed because I wondered what it said about a democracy that we only know one per cent of what goes on. I

asked, "Suppose you wrote a tell-all book?" He said he never would. "Hypothetically," I said, "suppose you did. Then what percentage would we know?" He said then it would be two per cent. And so I asked if he were serious and he said yes.

My old boss at the Washington Post, Ben Bradlee, the editor during Watergate, always says that the truth emerges. Gore was saying the truth doesn't emerge, that even the vice-president doesn't know a lot of what goes on. Now, I think he was being ornery and unpleasant. But that's the question. How do you, as a journalist or an author, find a way to up that to the maximum? I think we know 60 to 70 per cent of what goes on but you don't know what you don't know. So my approach is to take time.

After President Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq, the editors of the Washington Post gave me one year to find out why and how we went to war. That's a tremendous luxury. I ask this of any audience, how many people ever had a year to work on one thing? Raise your hands – none of you. I guess there are no academics in the audience. Academics get five, ten years to work on one thing and they don't even have to finish it.

At any rate, what I did was I looked for people at the bottom of the information chain -- somebody who took notes at National Security Council meetings, mid-level people, people who had contemporaneous notes, memos, calendars, logs. I worked my way up the chain and then talked to people in the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies. Then I compressed all of that, after about nine months' work, to a 21-page memo that listed what I had found out in chronological order and I sent a copy of this to President Bush.

My colleagues at the Washington Post said, "You what? You sent George Bush a 21-page memo?" One of them, who knew the Bush biography very well said, "Don't you know in all of his years at Andover, Yale and Harvard Business School he never read anything that long? What makes you think he'll start now?" Of course, he read it right away. He knew I was working on the book, and as I was saying to people here in the past day, I was taking him seriously.

It sounds comic, almost, that people aren't taking the President of the United States seriously. But in journalism, which has become so much a give-us-the-sound-bite, gotcha, the speed and the impatience to get something out, kind of business, a lot of people in government and business and elsewhere think we don't take them seriously. So he read this and Condi Rice, who was National Security Advisor, called me in and asked, "Are you going to write this book and series of articles whether you talk to the president or not?" And I said, "Of course." She said he would see me the next day. And for two afternoons, three and a half hours each, I interviewed him, at length, about how and why we went to war.

Guess how many questions I got to ask, in three and a half hours -- somebody. What do you think -- six, four or one? That would be if it were

Bill Clinton. And that would be a high number! I know Clinton and I'm sure you could interview him for three and a half hours and never ask one question. He always has a great deal to say.

With Bush, in those three and a half hours, I asked 500 questions. He gives short, direct answers. And let me just go to the last question I asked him. He was standing in the Oval Office with his hands in his pockets and I asked, "How do you think history will judge your Iraq War?" And he took both hands out of his pockets and shrugged and said, "History? We won't know. We'll all be dead." I remember I went home and my wife asked how the interview went. I told her he answered all the questions but that the really good news was I had the ending to the book. Endings are hard to find. And that's a great ending.

He was ducking the question, wasn't he? Well, we don't know. And he was right. It is possible – though I think the predominance of evidence available now would suggest this is not the case -- but it is possible there will be, in 25 years, real democracy in Iraq, more stability, less terrorism and they'll be erecting George W. Bush statues where they tore down the Saddam Hussein statues. It's possible.

And this is the most interesting thing about that ending to the book. Maybe a year later, I was giving a talk in Washington -- like this, at a dinner -- and the other speaker was Hillary Clinton, then the Senator from New York about to launch her campaign for the presidency. She came up to me afterwards and she said, "I quote from your book *Plan of Attack*, all the time." She said, "I quote so often I think I should pay you royalties." I wish I'd had my agent there and negotiated a fee. But I said, no, no of course you can quote from my book. I asked what she quoted and she told me she quoted the ending of the book. I asked her why and she really got exorcized. This was one of those moments when you peer into somebody's soul. She started pounding her fist into her hand and she said that no other president would talk like that. Presidents can't be like that, they can't talk like that, and she was slamming her fist into her hand and she said, "George Washington would not have talked like that, Thomas Jefferson would not have talked like that, Bill would not have talked like that." And I remember thinking, the new Mount Rushmore – Washington, Jefferson and Bill.

But I also thought, well, we won't know. We'll all be dead. It's possible. Then I realized that if she ever became president and was in the Oval Office and someone went in and said, "President Clinton, how do you think history will view your big decision on whatever it might be," she would look them in the eye and say, "I'll write it." She is a controlling politician. And by the way, I wouldn't rule out the possibility that she could still become president. She's a very, very determined, focused lady. If you want, I could tell Hillary stories for hours.

Now, I understand former President Bush was here five of six weeks ago and spoke and I've interviewed a number of people about what he had to say. How many people heard Bush speak when he was here? Somebody in the back there is raising two hands. What, did you go twice? I understand that he was very charming, people really connected with him and he said, essentially, I stand by the decisions I made. I made the decisions on the evidence I had and I offer no apologies. Let's let history judge and we won't know because we'll all be dead.

I am, particularly in the last book that you're going to get copies of, very critical of Bush and the way he lead. If you get into the detail -- in these four books, 1700 pages of meetings, intelligence reports, debates, phone calls -- you see that in deciding to go to war in Iraq he believed there were weapons of mass destruction. They had fifteen meetings on the plan to invade and how to make it better and more efficient and use fewer troops, but they had not a single meeting on whether to do it. That is astonishing. It was a giant decision. There was a momentum to war, there was a sense that it was going to be easy, and yet there was not a single meeting where the war cabinet said, we're about to do this...but should we? What are the reasons for it and against it? We are talking about the most important thing that has happened in United States foreign policy this century.

Another thing to remember is that when it went poorly, he denied it -- the third book I wrote about Bush was State of Denial. He denied that it was going poorly, and it's shocking almost to see the top secret reports and read about the meetings about the violence getting more and more out of hand. It got to the point in Iraq where the number of terrorist attacks or attacks on US forces or Iraqi forces was 800 a week. That's more than a hundred a day. That's four an hour. Can you imagine in Canada if you had anything like that? In the United States we haven't had a terrorist attack since 9-11. It was a staggering level of violence. The country was coming apart and on the verge of civil war and President Bush was out there saying, we're winning, absolutely we're winning. Or he would say that this was the moment that would mark the time that the terrorists began their retreat. This continued not for months, but for years.

I spoke to the 97 colonels in the United States army who were about to make general and I asked them how many of them believed we understood what the war was going to be when we launched it. Not a single hand went up. I asked them how many of thought we understood the war in Iraq in the present time. Fewer than half the hands went up. That represents a big, big problem.

I will give you an example from my fourth book about Bush, The War Within. I sent him a 12-page memo outlining what went on as best I could understand it -- what the secret memos were, what the intelligence was. This was when Bush decided on the surge, adding 30,000 troops. These

interviews with him took place last May, so, 11 months ago. I asked him how he decided on the surge. This was a big deal. This was a strategic decision to send 30,000 more troops, or five brigades. His National Security Advisor, Steve Hadley, was in the room. Hadley is shy and retiring and normally keeps his mouth shut. So Bush answered the question by saying the decision had come from Hadley's discussions with General Pace, who was the number one military man in the country.

I couldn't believe it. This was a staff discussion? I looked over at Bush. I want to quote directly from the transcript of what he said. "Okay, I don't know that. I'm not at those meetings, you'll be happy to hear. I've got other things to do." I was almost sick. I was almost sick for our military and sick for our country. I was sick at the idea that the Commander-in-Chief would absent himself and tell me that I should feel good that he's not at those meetings, that what happened in the decision to go to war in Iraq and then in the management of the war all the way through is that the Commander-in-Chief lost control. He lost his sense of what was real. I was saying to somebody that when you go into the details of it, it's almost too shocking to believe. Yet, that's what happened.

You know, we invaded Iraq six years ago. We've been in Iraq longer than in any other war the United States has been in, and the Commander-in-Chief went through a period of total denial. What is interesting is that things are more stable now, things are better now. There's no question about that. But I've done some reporting on it and it's not over at all. We're perhaps going to get a new serious wave of violence in Iraq. So, as somebody said, I'm kind of a rebuttal witness to President Bush, though I have to say he is a charming man and he has the best intentions. He told me once -- referring to the Iraq War -- "I believe we have a duty to free people and liberate people." That was a driver for him in the Iraq War. It was done with the best of intentions. But leadership has to do with engagement, getting all the information you need, making sure that you have all that information and just being a hound and a pest about getting data and then assessing where you are regularly and then, if it's not working -- waking up and doing something.

I'd just like to make another point quickly. I've been going on about Bush and the Iraq War, but what is happening in Afghanistan and Pakistan is going to loom larger in the coming months. You watch. It is going to be a big deal for the new president. I counted up 137 decisions and proposals the new president has made -- that's a giant number. Now, we don't know about the outcome of any of them, really, except maybe the shooting of those three pirates who hijacked the Maersk Alabama. That's over. But all the other decisions are pending and we're going to have to wait and see. He believes he's restored moral authority to the presidency, and on that I say, we'll see. Eight years ago George W. Bush took office and you may remember he said, "I've restored dignity and competence to the Oval

Office." Things look different now, eight years later. With Obama we are going to have to see.

His big accomplishment – and I think this is also Bush's accomplishment – has been with the financial crisis which really began in the middle of September of last year with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the bailouts of all kinds of banks and firms. But because Bush, the Federal Reserve, Obama and Congress have pumped trillions of dollars into the American economy I think the possibility of a repeat of the Great Depression is off the table. It is very unlikely we're going to have 20-25% unemployment. I think that we're in a recession and this recession may last for a really long time, but we aren't going to have the kind of situation that we had in the 1930s. There can, of course, be other jolts and other mysteries in the economy.

So getting back to the last point I want to make -- and I don't want to overstate it but I also don't want to understate it -- is that what is going on in Pakistan right now is chilling. The people who read the intelligence are biting their fingernails and not sleeping at night because al Qaeda and Bin Laden have found a new sanctuary in the tribal areas of Pakistan. They've had this sanctuary for a long time but they are currently more effective, more powerful. They're recruiting, they're communicating and they're plotting to do things in the United States and elsewhere in the world and people who know the most are really scared. So basically we have good news on the economy and basically really bad news on what's going on in Iraq and Pakistan.

People often ask me what I think we should really be worried about. We could go around the room here and ask people what it is they're truly worried about and hopefully we would raise some of these issues. Certainly the financial crisis and its impact would loom large, as would foreign affairs. Energy, obviously, is a big issue for people here, as are healthcare and education in the United States.

But my answer to my own question, what should we worry about the most, is that we should worry the most about secret government. In the United States, and I think in your democracy in Canada, too, a secret government is what will do you in. My one line summary is that democracies die in darkness. Nixon, during Watergate, tried to grab and seize power. I listen to his tapes. I have them on cassettes and I listen to them in my car -- it's a little sick, I agree -- but I do. And I have to tell you that what is on those tapes is so astonishing. The dog that never barks, to my knowledge, on the Nixon secret tapes, is that no one at any of these meetings or conversations or on the phone ever says, including Nixon or his top aides, what would be good or right for the country? What do the people need? It was always about Nixon. How do you settle a score with some enemy? How do you reward somebody who had supported him? If I did another book about Nixon it would be called, *The Wrong Man*. He

was out of the tradition of the American presidency in a very, very serious way. Clinton tried secrecy, Bush tried secrecy. It doesn't work. We have got to know, in a democracy, what's going on.

I think there's something in the air-handling system in the White House in Washington, in the air-conditioning or the heating system that puts out something that may give people a sense of being above it all, a sense that they don't have to really account for what they're doing. Obama says he's different. We will see. And we will measure that.

The last story I always tell is about years ago when the head of Simon and Schuster -- which has published all of my books -- took me to dinner in New York City at a restaurant much like this and asked me what my next book would be. I said I wanted to do some reading, reporting and think about it and he looked at me like I was nuts and he said, "You're nuts. We are in the product delivery business, in the marketing business and I want your next book and I want it within a certain time period and I need to know tonight what it's going to be about." And I resisted the whole night and he was grinding on me and finally at the end I said, "I've figured out what my next book is." He said, "At last! What?" I said, "My next book will be about the publishing business in New York City." Well, he told me that would be terrific and that he had a great title for me. I told him I didn't think there were any great titles left. He said, "Oh no. There's one. Your book on the publishing business in New York City will be called, My Last Book." And he really meant it. It was perhaps the only sincere thing he ever said. Thank you very much and let's do questions.