

Special Guest

Scott Rasmussen



Before I get started, I have one special guest that I would like to introduce: my father is here, Bill Rasmussen. If you get a chance to see him, give him a special greeting because today is my father's 80th birthday.

When I became a father, my wife and I decided that it was important to pass on deeply held family values. So when the boys were both very young, we explained to them that there are only two football teams in America: the New York Giants and the bad guys. As our younger son got more and more into this, he got a little confused. Who do you root for when the bad guys play each other? So we explained that there is a special group of bad guys — the Eagles, the Redskins and the Cowboys — and we always root against them. And then the question came, what do you do when the Redskins play the Cowboys? Well as a Giants fan, we want them both to lose. I know it's not intellectually possible, but that is what we are rooting for.

The reason I bring this up right now is in the world of politics, when the Republicans play the Democrats, there are an awful lot of Americans who want them both to lose. This is something that partisan activists forget. What we see in the election returns is the result of this frustration. In 2006, 2008 and 2010, voters didn't love Republicans one year and Democrats another, they voted against whoever was in charge.

And this trend has gone back even further. If you went back to 1992, Bill Clinton was elected with a majority

of Democrats in Congress. He lost control of Congress. Then George Bush came in; he had control with the Republicans, but he lost control. That had never before happened in back-to-back presidencies in American history. And then Barack Obama made it three in a row. This is a fundamental rejection of both political parties as they behave in Washington (the other Washington).

A lot of times people say that Americans are too cynical, but you know what? Six out of 10 insiders in a *National Journal* poll said the American people aren't informed enough for us to consider their opinions seriously. That is their attitude.

A couple years ago I gave a talk and I explained that the American people don't want to be governed from the left or the right or the center, they want to govern themselves; and the speaker after me, who is a charter member of the political class, said, "Well that is all well and good, but they're too stupid to do it." That is the attitude that comes from our national capital that frustrates so many people.

The number one issue in this election is the economy, everybody knows that. But the number two issue that nobody talks about is government ethics and corruption, and that has been true for many, many years. What we see is a really deep skepticism. It's no longer just about Congress in general. A majority of Americans believe their own representative in Congress trades votes for cash. And it's not just about official corruption; it's about concerns on policy issues.

Two out of three Americans say the best thing the federal government can do to help the U.S. economy is reduce spending. If Barack Obama wins, they don't expect spending to go down. If Mitt Romney wins, they don't expect spending to go down. There is a sense that things have gotten out of control.

By the way, there is a rational reason people don't believe spending will head down anytime soon. The last time that government spending went down in America from one year to the next was two years before I was born. (And since my father is 80 today, you can guess that was a very long time ago. It was the same year that Elvis Presley recorded his first single.) For 58 consecutive years, spending has gone up even though voters have voted for candidates who promise to cut spending and taxes.

Regardless of the policy implications, when voters elect people to do one thing and it never happens, there is a growing level of distrust, and that is what the election that we are facing today is all about.

When we talk about this election, the first thing as a pollster I have to tell you is that if anybody tonight — 22 days before the election — tells you they know who's going to win, they are either lying to you or deluding themselves. Our latest tracking poll nationally, as of this morning, shows 49% of Americans plan to vote for Mitt Romney; 48% plan to vote for Barack Obama. (I guess [the applause] means you're fans of toss-ups!)

In the Electoral College the numbers are just as close. You can look at all

kinds of permutations of who might win what state, and there is even one that I guess would be good for a laugh: if there is an Electoral College tie, the House of Representatives picks the president and the Senate picks the vice president, which means we could end up with a Mitt Romney president and Joe Biden as vice president. (I'm sure neither of them would think it's all that funny.)

But more realistically, there are three states that are going to pick the next president: Florida, Virginia and Ohio. The latest polling in Florida shows that Mitt Romney is up by four points. That's a state he should win because senior citizens more than anybody else want to see the president's health care law repealed, and seniors are obviously a big part of the electorate in Florida. In Virginia — that was a state that Barack Obama won in 2008; he was the first Democrat to win that state since the Beatles were a brand new act in America — right now Mitt Romney is barely ahead by two points in Virginia. Romney really needs to win all three if he wants to win the White House, and President Obama is ahead by single point in Ohio.

Those three states are being bombarded with all kinds of electioneering and campaign activity. They were actually shocked when I went to another swing state recently and mentioned that I could watch an entire football game without seeing a campaign commercial. They just didn't believe it, because everything that is happening in those states right now is all about the political battle that's going on.

We do not know who is going to win. What we do know is why it's close, and where it will lead us. The reason it's close is because elections are not about campaign strategies and commercials and brilliant consultants figuring out how to put somebody in the White House, they are about fundamentals.

When a president is running for re-election, the most important fundamental is his job approval rating. In 2004, George W. Bush on Election Day had a job approval rating just over 50%, he got just over 50% of the vote, and 51%

of Americans thought we were winning the war on terror. (That was the big issue of that campaign.) Coming into 2012, president Obama's job approval rating had been at 47 or 48% for more than two years. Sometimes (after Bin Laden was killed) it bounced up temporarily, sometimes (during the debt ceiling debacle) it slipped a little bit, but essentially it was at that same 47 or 48% level. That meant it was good enough for him to be competitive, but not good enough for him to feel confident of victory.

The reason his job approval was stuck there is because on the day President Obama took office, 35% of Americans said their finances were in good shape. Today, almost four years later, that number is only 38%. So people aren't feeling better off than they were four years ago, but they're not really feeling worse off either.

There is this fear among the uncommitted voters that neither guy gets it. In fact when we combine all of our polls and look at the uncommitted voters, the people who can't decide between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, a very small group, only 14% of them think the economy will get better if President Obama is reelected — but not many more think it will get better if Mitt Romney wins. They have given up, they have lost hope. That is part of the concern that needs to be addressed.

Two years ago, people thought our economy was in a typical recession. (We go through business cycles all the time.) Now we are at a point where people wonder if our nation will ever get out of the mess we're in.

Only 23% of Americans today believe our children will be better off than their parents. I want to put that number in context: in the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, 37% of Americans thought the next generation would be better off. So we are more pessimistic about our future today than our grandparents were in the Great Depression.

That is a fairly discouraging place to start, and the next discouragement comes from the fact that whoever wins

three weeks from tomorrow will stand up somewhere and say, "I just received a concession call from my opponent. We've had a great national debate, we've talked about all the big issues, and my team won. We have a mandate."

And whether it's Barack Obama who says that or Mitt Romney, they're both wrong. There will be no mandate coming out of this election. You don't get mandates by winning an election, you do it by governing.

What's actually going to happen this year is a little like the comparison to World War I; that was trench warfare, both sides right now getting out their base voters. At the end of World War I they said it was the war to end all wars. But all it really did was set the stage for a bigger battle, World War II.

Whatever happens on Election Day — and it does matter where the battle lines are drawn; where the trenches end up is very important — the real battle is going to begin on November 7.

To give you a sense of scale, I'd like you to take a moment and imagine we are back in 1992 and you are a bunch of newspaper executives and I was explaining to you about this brand new thing called the Internet that's coming. It is going to put the newspaper industry out of business. You would have laughed at me. In fact, I talked to some people in the newspaper industry in the mid '90s. I offered them a deal: "I will give you a free poll for your local market. All you have to do is when you publish this story on your website provide a link to my website." And the newspaper industry association said they wouldn't do that because newspapers are the only trusted local source of news; they would never provide links to anybody else. It didn't work out too well.

In the next 10 or 20 years, the change in the relationship between the American people and their government in every area — in healthcare, in education, in the way we deal with the economy — is going to change every bit as much as the newspaper industry has in the last 20 years. I don't know where it is going. I know the change will come

because the American people want to end that continuous growth of government, and the people in Washington don't like the idea of giving up power and money. There is a conflict coming.

The reason it is hard for us to see or to predict is because in America we have this notion that change begins from the top, and that's not really the way it works. In our country, always public opinion goes first, something happens to bring it to the leadership's attention and sooner or later the politicians catch up.

I want to give you a quick example of that. On December 1, 1955, a young woman refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Some people say that Rosa Parks started the civil rights movement. I have great respect for what she did, but she didn't start that movement, it had begun years before. Rosa Parks in her moment became a catalyst, and after that Martin Luther King came and gave voice to the movement. And he didn't attack America's ideals, he challenged the nation to live up to them.

The reason we know that public opinion changed before this change could take place in our political structure is because in 1943, 12 years before the famous incident, Rosa Parks did exactly the same thing on exactly the same bus line (and she even thinks it was exactly the same driver) and nothing happened. The Negro community, as they called it then, thought that she was a troublemaker. The white community didn't want to deal with it. Nothing happened. The 12-year gap? Well, that was plenty of time for public opinion to shift.

One part of it was African-American soldiers came back from World War II. Another part of it was Southern white women started going to school up north. Some of them came back and helped Rosa Parks. There was also Jackie Robinson playing major league baseball. There were changes in the culture, so that by the time Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in 1955, public opinion was ready for the change. It took nine more years before Congress took any action, but by the time they did public

support for the Civil Rights Act was near 70%.

It is hard to picture how individuals can change policy. But an organization like the Washington Policy Center — getting ideas out, shaping the conversation — is laying the groundwork for the type of change that is coming in the next decade or so.

When we talk about this change, and we talk about what it might mean, it is impossible to say what the moment will be that pushes us over the edge. The bailouts from four years ago might be a catalyst. They created the Tea Party movement. They created the Occupy movement. But they haven't yet really brought about fundamental change.

We know this because there are four men on the national ticket this year: Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan, Joe Biden and Barack Obama. All four of them supported the bailouts. So for the 75% of Americans that thought the bailouts were wrong, there is nobody representing them. That change will come. When we start talking about who will bring about the change, the nation needs to find a leader who can truly express the views, the frustrations of the American people.

How many people here ever saw the movie "City Slickers"? If you didn't see it, Billy Crystal played a guy having a midlife crisis. His wife told him to go find himself — go to a dude ranch. Jack Palance was a cowboy who didn't like the Billy Crystal character. They ended up alone, and Billy Crystal thought he was going to get knifed. Instead the old cowboy said, "Son, there is only one thing that matters in this world." Now Billy Crystal thinks he's going to give the meaning of life. He asks what it is and the old man says, "You've gotta figure that out for yourself."

Presidents generally have only one thing that matters. There was a president long ago who every morning had two hard-boiled eggs brought to him in bed. After he finished his first egg, his aides would come in and ring around the table. They would make policy decisions, and when everything was done the president of the United States

would set the price of gold. Now that sounds strange in today's world; we think it's a market function. One day the president said, "I'm going to raise the price of gold 21 cents." His treasury secretary asked him why, and he said, "Well, seven is a lucky number and this will be three times as lucky." The treasury secretary said if the American people knew what we were doing they would be terribly frightened. But in fact this was one of the most reassuring presidents of all time. His name was Franklin D. Roosevelt.

It wasn't gold pricing or economic policy that the nation was looking for. They were looking for somebody to reassure Americans that we'd get through this together. He set in motion a view of the role of government that was so successful, it lasted up until some crazy guy from out West came out and said, "The most frightening words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" And the Republicans in Washington, D.C., said Ronald Reagan was "unelectable."

Of course, not only did he get elected and many people revere him today, but he said something in his inaugural address. He said, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." There are two things I'd like you to be aware of about that: number one, six out of 10 Americans still agree with [that statement]. That attitude is still part of the fabric of America. But this next part is even more remarkable: when the president of the United States was dissing the role of government, trust in government went up for the only time in the postwar era. It was because the guy at the top got it. He was skeptical like all Americans were.

America is looking for someone who can step into that role today, who can articulate the hopes and fears of a nation, can give voice to them and can find a way to translate that into policy. Voters are ready for it. The American people are ready for a change. In fact the scariest outcome from election 2012 would be for Mitt Romney to win the election, for the Republicans to win both houses of Congress, and then to do absolutely nothing. If that were to

happen we would have three or four major presidential candidates the next time around.

It is a very important election. We hear about numbers. We hear about the races and campaign strategies. Let me give you a dose of really depressing news. You have been told that our government is \$16 trillion in debt. If you count the unfunded liabilities, the total debt of our government is actually just over \$100 trillion. The good news? Voters are ready to make changes. They are not looking for austerity next year. They are looking for long-term fundamental changes in the relationship between the American people and their government.

It will come about because the reason our government grew so big, the reason it became so centralized was because the media became more centralized. In the 1960s and '70s there were just three television networks, that's where you got all of your information. Government rode along with that wave and is now likely to head back in the other direction, because in the "iPad era" you can't possibly have that much concentration of power.

Let me give it to you in a political sense.

After Pearl Harbor, 90 million Americans listened to Franklin Roosevelt talk on the radio — 90 million in a nation that then had only 130 million people. When Jimmy Carter was president, if you wanted to watch, say, "Charlie's Angels," you had to wait until the president was done speaking, because there were three networks and he was on all of them. So we had a centralized structure that focused attention on the government.

Today when Barack Obama gives a speech he has about 30 million people watch, mostly partisan Democrats. When George W. Bush was president, only Republicans watched. While President Obama speaks today, his message is simultaneously translated by Sean Hannity. You cannot get a message out the way that you used to. This is the reason change will come from the American people. We do not know what that change will look like. We know this is the way things happen in the United States.

I want to give you one more example, because if you remember nothing that I have said tonight, I really hope that you will appreciate the message that public opinion drives the process; it is only a question of time before the politicians catch up.

We were all taught that April 19, 1775, there was a "shot heard 'round the world" that began the American Revolution. And it is a nice story, but it is not true. In the 1750s and 1760s and early 1770s, colonists began to have a different idea about their relationship with the mother country. There were all kinds of events that could have been a catalyst: there was the Stamp Act and the Intolerable Acts and the Boston Tea Party and the Boston Massacre.

We don't know why the "shot heard 'round the world" became the catalyst that started the revolution. What we do know is that there were 77 minutemen standing at Lexington when that shot was fired. We know that the British were professionals. In the first volley of the Revolutionary War, 18 of the 77 minutemen were felled by a bullet. (We kind of skip over that part in our fairytale version of this.) The other 59 didn't think, "Wow, we just started a revolution!" They fled into the woods. They thought, "We just picked a fight

with the mightiest military power on earth!" It took six years before the revolution was won; it took six more years before the Constitution was ratified. And all of that began without a politician rallying the cause. It wasn't until 15 months *after* the shots were fired at Lexington that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, and Jefferson himself said that all he was doing was acting as a cipher for the American people.

Public attitudes changed. There was a catalyst, and the politicians caught up later.

Now, that is a scary proposition. When we go through the changes after the 2012 election, we don't know if they will end up being in a positive direction or a negative direction. I happen to be an optimist. I believe that America's best days are still ahead of us. I also believe it might get a little bit worse before it gets better. But what gets me through is my confidence in the American people. Very simply, 81% of Americans today still believe that we are "endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Seven out of 10 believe that governments derive their only just authority from the consent of the governed. Six out of 10 continue to believe that if we live up to our ideals America is the last best hope of mankind.

You can put the numbers together any way that you want, but the attitude is very simple. Americans today are looking for the exact same thing that they were looking for at the end of the most famous presidential speech of all time. What the American people want today is for our nation to have a new birth of freedom so the "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." Thank you very much.