

You Might Be Right - Media and the Presidential Election - Transcript

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Dan Balz: We have to be as measured as we possibly can about all of these aspects that make up this election. It's the most difficult election to cover of all of the elections that I've been involved in.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support from members of our Producer Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work visit, youmightberight.org.

Traditional media has long played an important role in presidential elections by informing voters about the views and backgrounds of candidates for public office, facilitating debate and dialogue between candidates and voters, and reporting election results in a timely and accurate manner. But today, candidates can speak directly to voters through social media and no longer feel compelled to participate in presidential debates, shifting the dynamics between candidates and the press.

In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, and their guests discuss the evolving role of traditional media in a modern presidential campaign and how both campaigns and news organizations are responding.

Bill Haslam: Governor, we're, as we always say, entering into another consequential election. This one does feel consequential and unique and one of the key things that will be observed is the role of the media, and that's changed over time. It's changed from when you and I were elected, but even on the national scene, it's a much different environment. We have two guests that I think are going to explore that issue from fairly different viewpoints.

Phil Bredesen: I think it's really important. I mean, the media has changed. I don't think we've begun to reckon with sort of all of the realities of that and what the implications are. And, of course, they're the intermediary by which people get their information about candidates and about issues. As nice as New Hampshire town meetings are or something, the reality is that 99.9% of the people who are going to vote will never have met a candidate, the candidates for president, certainly, or had a chance to hear them in a non-structured way. So the way in which they operate and the way they look at their job I think is really important and continues to evolve.

Bill Haslam: Let's jump right into it.

Phil Bredesen: Let's do it.

Well, Bill our guest here I think is going to be very interesting. Somebody who's right in the middle of things right now. Natalie Allison is a national political reporter for Politico. She joined Politico in 2021 and she currently focuses on Republicans in the 2024 presidential election. Previously she reported on Politics for the Tennessean right here at home. A North Carolina native, Natalie graduated from Elon University and began a reporting career covering comps and city government for her hometown newspaper. We're delighted to have you with us, Natalie.

Natalie Allison: Great to be here. Thanks for having me, governors.

Bill Haslam: Natalie, and I should disclose up front Natalie, when she came to the Tennessean and I was still in office, so I'll give her the compliment: She always asks those questions that's the right question, but you wish you wouldn't ask it, so she—

Phil Bredeesen: Well, I'm glad I missed it then.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. She did her work well, and we promised not to reverse the tables and ask you those hard questions so that you—

Natalie Allison: Which you have done before. You've interviewed me on a podcast before.

Bill Haslam: Fair point, fair point.

Okay, let me jump in first. You've spent the last three or four months in Iowa and New Hampshire. That's kind of famous for people for the political impact. Just, I mean, as a personal observation, what would surprise most Americans who hear all about the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary? What would surprise us if we went and did what you've done for the last three or four months?

Natalie Allison: It's fascinating watching people who spend their time that they could be doing anything else. They go out on a weeknight, on a weekday, even on weekends to these political events. They could be hanging out with their kids, they could be watching TV and they'll show up to hear a candidate that they may know they never have any intention of voting for, but they're curious and they take it really seriously that they have the opportunity to really be gatekeepers in these presidential primaries to determine the fate of candidates if they get to continue. And so it's really interesting. Anywhere else I've lived, it's been Super Tuesday states or something like that, and of course people try to educate themselves ahead of that primary election and by that point it's really whittled down, but these people take seriously the role they have in getting to decide who gets to continue on in the race.

Phil Bredeesen: Those, when you look at them from afar, they both have kind of a New England town meeting feeling about them of small numbers of people who care deeply about the issues. In your experience in these things, do these candidate visits and questions, have they've ever changed anybody's mind?

Natalie Allison: It's funny, the reporters who show up at these events, they just kind of flock to all of the attendees to try to interview them about what they think. And so before and after, it's a frenzy of reporters going up to these people who are at the events and by the end of it, when it's almost time for the primary, the caucus, you have reporters accidentally trying to interview reporters because they don't know who they are, but to answer your question, no. Someone might say that they really liked what a certain person said, but I think at the end of the day, the power of the television advertisements, the power of how someone is doing in the polling really makes a big difference. They're watching these candidates come through for 12 months, and so if they base their decision on what a certain person said at this particular town hall in August or something, well, the world could look a lot different in January.

And that's sort of something we did see. At one point in this race, there were people talking about Ron DeSantis coming back and surpassing Trump, and that was the expectation of when is he going to catch up to Trump? When is he going to catch up to Trump? And early on, there were people I talked to who tried to keep an open mind about that. But no, I think a lot of people just wait until the end and they know that there's a long road to voting, to this presidential primary, that they can show up and listen to these candidates, but ultimately they're really not going to decide until the last minute and they'll take in the totality of the circumstances of how their candidate is doing in polling and maybe what they said in the news that week.

Bill Haslam: So let me follow up on that. A lot of times in the news there's a candidate makes a statement or does something and it gets a lot of attention for the reason you said, but I guess at the end of the day is that consequential? So when a Nikki Haley says in New Hampshire that Iowa starts it and New Hampshire corrects it, or that's not the exact wording, but something to that effect. Do micro things like that affect the voting on the ground or is it more, no, it's big macro issues that are pushing people in general?

Natalie Allison: I think people take those in. It's like eventually a straw that breaks the camel's back. So I don't think Nikki Haley saying something is going to make or break her chances, a comment that gets picked up and shared on social media. But going back to someone like DeSantis, he suffered this very long and painful political death in this race because there were so many stories just over and over and over about a little thing he did here, an awkward smile he had there, a strange interaction he had with a child at this fair and it wasn't just one thing that really did him in. If you look at a graph showing how he was polling over the last year, it was a very gradual progression.

And we've seen that with even someone like the Vivek Ramaswamy. It wasn't one thing he did or said at a debate or on Twitter, X rather now, that made him take off, but he did experience a surge sometime back in late summer of last year and then that went back down. So we rarely see from one day to the next someone just spiking in public opinion. It seems like it's this gradual progression, but those moments, to your point, that do get picked up and shared online and go viral, they certainly play a factor and it shapes how people think about these candidates.

Phil Bredezen: What we're trying to discuss in this section of the podcast is really the role of

the media in these. When you talk about the media picking up DeSantis's awkward interchange with a child or something like that, do you think the media is doing its job properly when you get as much emphasis as you get on those kinds of things and I think relatively less on more substantive kinds of issues, is that a problem?

Natalie Allison: I think that's a fascinating question, Governor, and it does speak to how coverage by the news media of presidential races in particular, I mean really of any type of politics, but of presidential races, has changed. I was talking just yesterday with a great Tennessean, Oscar Brock, he's a Republican National Committee man, and I was asking him about his observations. He's a rabid consumer of news. He's a news junkie, can't get enough of political news. And I was asking him, and he noted that for someone like himself who wants to know everything that's happening with these candidates, the coverage today is actually more helpful. Because you can find out every time they cough, you don't have to wait to get a short maybe surface level update on the evening news or even when websites started writing stories more frequently, it wasn't at the pace of we have now, tweets going out every moment and things like that.

So I think in a lot of ways, if you're someone who is a political junkie, which is not – is by no means the most, the majority of Americans – it's a benefit for you. For everyone else, there's a lot of noise and that noise I think, to your point, may not always be helpful. And I think DeSantis having an awkward smile or Nikki Haley's sweater being commented on, what she's wearing, those things don't really get to the heart of what their policy platform would be. And I think that that can be distracting for a lot of people. And in the news business sometimes we pick up on meta narratives more than really important narratives.

And so it's a balancing act. There's a constant demand for content and we also want to be the eyes and the ears of people on the ground. And yeah, there's a lot of really trivial exchanges that we might cover, but sometimes in those we'll pick up on something that does matter. So in a conversation one of these candidates is having with someone at a diner that maybe they don't think the press hears, we might find out that suddenly they're telling someone their position on abortion in New Hampshire is something different than what they told someone at the American Legion in Iowa. There is some benefit to us stalking them and having these really incremental updates on what they're doing, but I do agree that all that noise may not be helpful for your average consumer of news.

Bill Haslam: Now that's a great intro to my question. What do you see your role being? Natalie Allison, you're out on the trail, et cetera. At the end of the day, when you go to bed at night, I know you want to do your job the best way you can. What do you see your role being?

Natalie Allison: At the risk of sounding self-important because there are so many more jobs and functions in society that trump what a reporter does, but I think we have maybe the most important job in vetting candidates for office in America. At one point, that extended to people running for city council and school board and local offices, but reporters vetting the candidates for president, that's something that news outlets still put a lot of resources and money behind in

the U.S.

And so with the exception of the people in Iowa and New Hampshire who are getting visits from these candidates for months, people in places like Tennessee, or my parents back home in North Carolina who they're voting on Super Tuesday, they're not getting all of these visits from candidates. They're not getting the opportunity to stand behind a mic and ask them questions or to shake their hand. And so it's our job to let them know this is what this person is like, this is what they believe, this is what they say they believe, and then when we press them on it, this is how their answer changed. And so it's our job to sort out what's what for folks who would really not have the access to these people other than the ads they're taking out on television and the posts they're posting on social media.

Bill Haslam: I think one of the dangers of reporting, and back to the question I asked you before in terms of how you see your role, is trying to make certain I really am getting to the truth of this the best I can and not just my opinion of it. People particularly on my side are so leery that the media leans left. I'm sure folks on the left think it leans the other way. How do you personally keep your own opinions out of what you're writing and yet you bring the knowledge you have? How do you do both?

Natalie Allison: I don't blame anyone who has concerns about whether they can trust national media, local media. I understand why people think the way they do because everything is becoming so polarized and it's hard to know which institutions anymore you can trust. So I don't blame people for that, but I take it really seriously. It comes down to watching what you tweet, watching what you say in a one-off conversation to when I'm writing a story, doing everything I can to not ignore a very real other side to it, real criticisms of maybe what the main subject of what I'm writing is.

And so I take that very seriously and I do think starting off in a local newsroom, even though it was already in a state of lacking a lot of resources and trying to make sure that people in the community would trust us, we were already at a difficult place then. But I think that experience is something I'm really grateful for because it did teach me to really prioritize the fundamentals of be fair, be objective, just tell the truth and listen to both sides. And both sides are not always equal, and that's something you have to reflect in the story as well, but you do have to hear everyone out.

Phil Bredesen: We're coming into a presidential election year, which is likely to be extremely interesting. I mean, it looks to be a matchup that majority of Americans are saying, "This is not the matchup we wanted." Enormous amounts of money going into paid media and so on. If you had a chance to give a speech to a gathering of journalists who were covering, I suppose you had a convention out there in Las Vegas and they invited you to come and speak, what would you tell your fellow members of the reporting community? I mean, what advice would you give them about how to handle the next few months and what should you be looking to do and not do?

Natalie Allison: I do think a lot of us need to take a step back, take a breath, and actually think about the next few months, beyond the next few days. I think a lot of times in this frenzy of trying to scoop the next story and cover what is the next campaign strategy that Donald Trump or Nikki Haley are going to launch, we can lose sight of the fact that this is very likely going to be a really unprecedented election. We could have a convicted felon on the ballot, perhaps. We could have a presidential nominee or maybe at that point candidate who was faced with the prospect of taking a plea deal to avoid prison time.

We could have the situation where there is a contested convention and as part of a plea deal, a presidential candidate would have to release delegates and then we're starting from scratch and there's a panic to figure out a new nominee and all of these things could happen, and I think a lot of us are really stuck in today and thinking about the coming days that we aren't necessarily thinking about how this could play out and then what our role will be during that. And so I do think it's important for us to keep perspective on how wild this could be, to your point, Governor.

Phil Bredesen: Just as a follow-up to that, I mean you've mentioned one of the possibilities obviously, which is something happening in the judicial system with Donald Trump, but you also have two quite elderly candidates. I can say that because I'm in the same category and so on, and you also have the possibility of significant health issues coming up during the course of the campaign. How should the media handle that?

Natalie Allison: That's something that Donald Trump's last meeting Republican opponent is really hitting him on. She says, "There's going to be a woman president, it's going to be me or Kamala Harris," and she's implying that likely one or both of those men, if it's not a legal problem, would die or have health problems. And that's also a type of discourse that we're not really used to having in this process, and it raises questions of ageism and is it okay to say that an 80-year-old is experiencing cognitive decline? Is it okay to talk about the real risks of health problems and how should we as reporters be talking about these things?

I think in a lot of ways we rely on just reporting on the criticisms of Trump and Biden, of their opponents, of people on both sides who are pointing out that both of them are old and do have maybe some type of cognitive decline right now, but for the most part, reporters are treating them as two candidates who could be 60, could be 50, could be anybody else. I think it is normalized the fact that they're pretty old at this point, despite the fact that most Americans don't want to see them on the ballot. And so it's a difficult question. How often should we be talking about the health conditions of candidates on the ballot? I don't know the answer to that.

Phil Bredesen: I have a final question for you. This podcast is inspired by Howard Baker who would make the point of always to remember the other person might be right. Is there a time in your own life in what you do where that's happened, where you had some point of view or some opinion and there was someone else you listened to and it caused you to have a substantial rethinking or change in the way you thought about an issue and believed about it?

Natalie Allison: That's happened over and over for me, but I think one of my favorite examples

of this, it's sort of generic because it encompasses a lot of issues, but I grew up in a very conservative family, a small town, you would think of them probably today as just a traditional Republican family. But I was insulated in a lot of ways, and I was very young when I graduated college and took my first newspaper job at 19 and I suddenly came face to face with the kinds of people I never had to talk to. I had never had to know what to do with, I never had to really think about them in any way, but the abstract, with gay people, with Muslims, with undocumented immigrants, with the kind of people that I knew existed, and maybe I had feelings one way or the other but had never had to talk to them face to face, and in my first newspaper job I did that.

And it fundamentally changed me, listening to these people's stories and maybe it didn't completely change my way of thinking one way or the other. On many issues it did, but just the act of talking with the types of people that you never really had to come face to face with was a very transformational process for me, and I'm always going to be very grateful that this job opened up my eyes to just considering people that I never had to consider when you live in a very insulated type of place.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I think Bill would probably agree with me that running for office is something in that category that it's just like it completely opens up your world to people who you just had not had interactions with.

Bill Haslam: Right. Well, Natalie, thank you. Congratulations, by the way on graduating from college at 19. I'm not certain I would've been in that ballpark, but also just for your career and the achievement so far, it's been fun to watch your growth and your increasing role in the media and the country, and I'm fairly confident that will continue. So thank you for joining us. We really appreciate your perspective.

Natalie Allison: Thank you both, Governors. It was an honor to come on.

Bill Haslam: Thanks, Natalie.

Phil Bredeesen: She's, I think has an impressive grasp of thing for someone that young.

Bill Haslam: Like I said, I have the benefit of having been covered by her and her role at the Tennesseean, but then watching her and reading her in Politico, she's got a great insight and I loved her perspective on how the media should approach the incredibly important responsibility. It's encouraging to me when I see somebody who does see that as a responsibility.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah. This whole subject of how the media interacts with this selection and what their responsibilities are and aren't, it's important at any time, but particularly with the distrust that exists at the moment of the media and the kind of singling out of one channel over another that people do, I think it becomes doubly important. They have a huge influence in what's going to happen in this country.

Bill Haslam: Phil, our second guest is someone that, I guess this is unusual for somebody in

political office to say of someone in the media, but I'm actually a fan of his for the way that he reports and his thoroughness and his really desire to get it right, and to me he's kind of a model of what it should look like. Dan Balz is the chief correspondent for the Washington Post. He joined the post back in '78. Since the subject is covering presidential campaigns in the media, he's covered 10, starting with one of the most famous, the Chicago in 1968, so lots to talk about there. He's written a couple of bestsellers and several other books, and like I said, he truly is, I think if you ask somebody for who's the statesman of the national political media, you probably get Dan's answer more than anyone else.

Phil Bredezen: I think you're right about that.

And Dan, welcome. And I'd like to just start out with the fact that you do have a long history and experience in covering presidential elections as well as other things obviously. Between '68 and now, I mean, how has the role of the media changed in that process? What's changed in it? How has the impact of what the media does changed? Just give us kind of a rundown as to what's happened over these past few decades.

Dan Balz: I'd be happy to do that. First of all, just let me say thanks to both of you for having me on. I've covered you both over a long number of years and have come to appreciate the approach that you both have taken to governing in tough times. So it's a pleasure to be with you.

In '68, I was fresh out of college and kind of by accident ended up at the Chicago Convention. I was working for my hometown newspaper and we had one credential and I was the junior member of the staff and nobody else wanted it, so I got to go there. At that point in our political slash media history, there were two dominant forces. One obviously was big city newspapers at a time when we had a lot of robust big city newspapers all over the country, which is not the case today.

The second was that TV was quite dominant in those days. TV is still dominant, but in a much different way. In those days, it was the major broadcast networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Today it's really cable television and a much more fractured environment. But the third and most significant change really is what the internet revolution did to journalism in general, coupled with the rise of social media.

And so we now just have, I would say, a quite different media political environment than we had back then, or even that we had 25 years ago before the internet was as dominant as it was. We know that the cable networks are kind of ideologically aligned, which means people get their information from the network that they feel most comfortable getting their information from, the one that they tend to agree with more. We have much, much less cross-current discussion. We don't have in any way a common story of where we are as Americans. We used to have something approaching that when everybody watched one of the networks for the evening news. That's long gone, and so people kind of pick and choose. Most young people get their information from their smartphones, and that experience is much different than sitting down with a printed newspaper or watching cable television or regular television.

So it's more difficult I think, as a political reporter to get a feel for what's going on everywhere. I think we all tend to be a little bit more isolated in how we, or where we, go and how we try to talk to people. So I just think there are a lot more challenges today than there were then.

The other reality, which I think states the obvious, but I think many people may not understand this. Again, in the pre-internet days, in the days when print newspapers were dominant, we had one or two deadlines every day. They were late in the day – early evening, and then later in the evening – which meant if something happened during the early part of the day, you had quite a few hours to really report it out and to talk to a lot of people and to try to get as much depth and context and fresh facts as you were able to get. Now when something happens, we have to move instantly. We're in competition with everybody at this point, and we have to try to get a story up on our website as swiftly as we can and then keep adding to it, but it changes the nature of how we present information and how people get it. So it's a lot different today than it was then for all those reasons.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. Let me just follow up quickly with one aspect to that, if I may, and that is that you certainly have outlined substantive ways in which it has changed, but what has that done to the political process? I mean, how has it changed how democracy works in our country, how people are selected?

Dan Balz: I think it's more fraught today. I mean, we see the challenges to our democratic processes in a variety of ways. I mean, I think both of you– I think I've talked to both of you about the nature of coverage of state houses, which probably when Governor Bredesen, when you were governor, there was a fairly robust State House press corps. I know I've talked to Governor Haslam about what it was like during his administration and the degree to which that press corps shrank dramatically. There is a cost that goes along with that, as you know. Less accountability, less aggressive coverage, less information for the public. And so that's one thing. I think another element in terms of – let's talk about presidential politics for a minute. Today, really, if you look at the way we pick our presidents and certainly the way we pick our nominees, it's a much more nationalized process than it used to be, which is to say it plays out on cable and social media and less so on the ground, for example, in Iowa or New Hampshire.

Iowa and New Hampshire used to be the states that got the early look at the candidates. They have a culture of civic responsibility in both of those states where people turn out, look at the candidates, evaluate the candidates, give an opportunity to lesser known candidates, and in a sense, help to tell the rest of the country, "Here's an early judgment on who's got talent and who doesn't or who's got a great message and who doesn't." That's less so today so much more is done through cable television and I think that makes it a little bit more of a spectator sport, if you will. I use that word advisedly, sport, but it's more spectator and less participatory, and I think that that is not a good thing for democracy.

And then the other aspect is the question of who decides to run in these situations. I think one big thing that's changed is the role of Super PACs and their influence on presidential

candidates. I don't think there's a presidential candidate who has any aspiration to become the nominee of their party who doesn't have to have a big Super PAC. And there's a disconnect again between the Super PAC and a traditional campaign, and I think there's some detriment to the way democracy does and should work because of that.

Bill Haslam: Every presidential election is consequential. This one might be not just consequential, but unique due to age of the two candidates, legal issues definitely surrounding Donald Trump, but some legal issues with family around a President Biden. How do you approach an election— I'm betting there's lots of political reporters out there that are saying, "If I get a chance to have a cup of coffee with Dan Balz to talk about this." What advice would you give the younger folks who are covering an election that we always say everything's unprecedented, but this one feels like it really is unprecedented?

Dan Balz: Yeah, this time we're not making it up.

Bill Haslam: Right. Right.

Dan Balz: It's not hyperbole, it's real. Governor, we talk about this all the time at the Post, the nature of this election, how it is different, why it is different, and therefore what we do about how to cover it. I think there are several things. One, I mean let's start with the former president who's under indictment in four different jurisdictions, and we know 91 felony counts in those indictments. We've never been through anything like this. We've never had any situation in which the likely nominee of one of the major political parties could be convicted of a serious crime by the time people have to vote in November. We have to take cognizance of that. We have to build that into our understanding of how people may be evaluating the candidates. We have to report a campaign in which part of the campaigning is taking place in a courtroom. So just for starters, there's that.

The second aspect that makes this obviously unprecedented and unique is that again, one of the two likely nominees has never allowed for the fact that he fairly lost the election in 2020, and that has infected the political system and particularly the Republican Party, a good portion of the Republican Party. We've been doing polling in all of the early states, and one of the questions we ask of Republicans, do you think President Biden was fairly elected or it was as a result of fraud and in every state a majority, and in some cases, a significant majority of Republicans say he was not fairly elected, he was not legitimately elected. That's another aspect.

The age factor is a big issue that we have to deal with and we have to think about what's the fair way to do that. President Biden obviously shows his age more than the former president does, and there's great concern about somebody who would be elected at age 82 and have a second term in which he would be 86 by the time he finished. We know that there is tremendous concern on the part of Democrats as a result of that. We have to build that in, and yet we have to recognize that President Trump is not a kid either. He's 77.

So there's all of this, and the other factor frankly is this is going to be the longest general

election in the history of the country with two candidates that a majority of the public wishes were not the two major candidates. So the advice, such as it is, that I've offered to others on our team is that we have to be as measured as we possibly can about all of these aspects that make up this election. We have been pretty rigorous about pointing out what President Trump brings to the table and what he might bring to the table in a second term. But I think another aspect is we have to do a fuller job of understanding why there are as many people as they are, given what everyone knows about President Trump, why are many people so dissatisfied with President Biden? What is the nature of the opposition to President Biden and who are the people who will help to decide this election?

So as I say, we have these conversations and we're constantly calibrating how we approach week by week, month by month, but it's the most difficult election to cover of all of the elections that I've been involved in.

Phil Bredezen: Let me ask you a question. You described in the history of media coverage how we no longer have three major networks setting in some way some common tone for discussion of issues, and that's true and it's not going to change. We do have a situation a little bit like that though with the big national newspapers, with the New York Times, with yourself, the Post, at the Wall Street Journal and maybe the LA Times kind of edges up against that and so on. Do you think – and obviously they don't have the reach, you're not in everybody's home at 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock in the evening every night – but do these big national papers or the ones that have the resources, do they have some new special role to play as a result of that?

Dan Balz: That's a good question. I don't think we have a new role to play, but I think you're right. I think at this point there are three news organizations that have some semblance of an economic model that gives them resources to be able to do things that most other newspapers can't do. Obviously, the Times is the biggest and probably richest at this point. We're in there though we have lost digital subscribers in the last few years, and the Wall Street Journal, which occupies kind of a unique place just because it is a more specialized publication as a business oriented, it has a very strong editorial page, conservative editorial page. I think the LA Times has fallen on hard times, sadly. It was once a great paper. USA Today has national reach. I don't know how much influence it has. What that means in terms of how we cover, I think we recognize that we can do things that others can't, and obviously we're out on the campaign trail as much as anybody, and I would add Politico to that mix as a digital-only force.

But what we can do in addition to kind of the traditional day by day news coverage is we do have resources to do accountability reporting, to do investigative reporting, to do longer takeouts on why things happened or what happened and how they unfolded that brings an added value to the overall coverage. Does that give us a greater responsibility? Yes, I think it does, and I think we do take that seriously. We have advantages. I think we recognize that, but it comes with a responsibility to use those resources, to use those as wisely and as strategically as we possibly can.

Bill Haslam: Dan, I can't remember the exact word you said, but when I asked you the

question, how would you counsel some younger journalists in such a consequential election, and you said something about using their sensibilities or some word to say, remember your responsibility. You've been doing this for a long time. Like all of us, you have your own opinions. How do you keep your own opinion separate from reporting for the very reason that you just answered Phil's question about the important role that you play. Again, what advice would you give to a younger journalist about, you can't set aside your own personal views on everything, but you do want to approach it in a, maybe you said measured, I'm not sure what the word was.

Dan Balz: I come from an earlier era when people were trained somewhat differently than perhaps they are today. Look, everybody has biases. Everybody has opinions. Everyone is a creature of their own upbringing, so we all have that. But I think that the important thing if you're on the reporting side as I've been all my career, is that you have to approach this, with an open mind and an openness and a willingness to listen, and particularly a willingness to listen to people whom you don't understand as well or whose views may differ from your own personal views. I've always thought that what I want is to be able to produce journalism that people of varying views or political allegiances would see as fair. And by that I don't mean a kind of both sides-ism. I mean, I think that we've all run into that question over the last half dozen years, and that's not what really good journalism is, but it is an effort to seek the truth and to recognize that the truth is always elusive.

We have on our wall when you come into our newsroom are the seven principles that Eugene Meyer enunciated when he bought the Washington Post back in the 1930s, and the first one says something like, "We will seek the truth to the extent that the truth can be discovered or known," and that means fact finding and the pursuit of truth, but also that on the first day, you're not always going to get the full story or the full truth, and you have to keep going and you have to be willing to recognize that you haven't got it right the first time or you didn't understand things the first time and acknowledge that and be more transparent with readers about those limitations. So I think that's kind of the way I've always thought about it.

Phil Bredezen: One question that we've asked our guests, I'd like to pass on to you as well is the inspiration for this podcast was really Howard Baker and his statements that, remember the other fellow might be right and—

Bill Haslam: Feels quaint today, doesn't it?

Phil Bredezen: I'm curious about— you have such a long and storied and rich career, if you have an example in your own life and experience and career where on some issue, some individual who you talked with really caused you to see it in a very different way that having an open mind and listening, as you've described as being important, really changed your own view on something.

Dan Balz: The longer I've been at this, the more aware I am of how much I still don't know. One of the great things about being a national political reporter is you do get around the country and you get to understand the political cultures of different states, and as you both know, political

culture in Tennessee is not the same as it is in Iowa or in California. I mean, these states are different and the ability to understand the complexity of the country is a reminder of, in a sense, the dangers of superficiality about political coverage and about applying stereotypical views about all kinds of people to your coverage. And so it's been that experience.

Now, if you want me to single out a name, I would probably single out Dave Broder, who was my mentor here at The Post and was the best political reporter of his or probably any generation, and David brought a humility to his reporting. I mean, he was a great political reporter. He understood the country, he understood politicians, but David never believed that he had kind of received wisdom or the received truth. I remember as a young person in this town, it was before I worked at the Washington Post, I happened to be at a dinner where David was in attendance and I was brand new in Washington, brand new reporter, and he didn't really know me. We had crossed paths once, but other than that, he did not know me. And as we sat there, he asked me my opinions about things and I was so struck by this. It was like, wait a minute. I'm 20 x years old, and you're already the smartest political reporter in town.

But that was one of the reasons he was the smartest political reporter, is that he was seeking out opinions from all kinds of people and willing to believe that other people had information and ideas that would be valuable to him to put in his own database. That was always a lesson to me about what the nature of the way you should go about doing your political reporting.

Bill Haslam: You've modeled that same humility and integrity. We're grateful for the work you've done, but we're particularly grateful for spending this time with us. Dan, thanks so much. It's been a great conversation and helpful for this, as we said, important and consequential election that we're getting ready to run into.

Dan Balz: Thank you, Bill, both, I appreciate it.

Phil Bredeesen: We really appreciate it. Thank you.

Bill Haslam: Well, Phil, we've had an interesting conversation, two fairly different media folks, one who I think you might call the dean of journalism in the country, and then Natalie, who's on the newer end of her career, but right in the thick of it, particularly in the last few months in Iowa and New Hampshire.

Phil Bredeesen: It's encouraging to me that you have people at opposite ends of their careers here, and to have such good people and thoughtful people at both ends of that is encouraging to me. I think we're moving in the right direction.

Bill Haslam: So let me ask you a question. Like every other institution, whether it be military, the church, congress, professions, the impression of the media has dwindled, or fallen I guess, recently. Is that fair or not? I mean, it's obviously important to have a media covering these big elections that we can trust. What would be your advice to people who say, "Well, it just feels like everybody has their agenda. I don't know who I can trust."

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. I mean, I come at that from the standpoint of saying, well, I don't know if I want to trust any one sort of source of information. The kind of thing that seems to work is what Dan talked about at the end of just make sure you get your information from a bunch of different sources. I always remember the stories about Franklin Roosevelt, who when he was president, would pick up the phone and call somebody six levels down in the State Department who'd never even met him before to just get some piece of information. I think that notion of seeking out alternative opinions and opinions from people who are not the ones who are always out front offering them is really important, and I guess employing that in the way you treat the media is what I'd recommend to a relative of mine or someone who wanted to understand how to navigate this.

Bill Haslam: We all are subject to confirmation bias. We want people to tell us what we already believe. And I do the same thing. I urge people like, listen and read to people who don't think exactly like you do. The competition of ideas is what has made this country great.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, some people have talked on these podcasts about the increasing nationalization of all these issues, which I think both of us have seen right here in Tennessee. I mean, at the beginning of my term as governor, there was almost nothing that went on in the state that was referenced to the national political environment. By the time you left, everything was. And that's unfortunate because it makes kind of a monoculture out of politics in the country in a way that's not healthy.

Bill Haslam: Today, if you're running for county commission somewhere in Tennessee, in a small town, if you knock on somebody's door to solicit their vote, their first question's going to be, Is more than likely to be, "How do you feel about Donald Trump?" I mean, it's like you said, the issues have become nationalized in a way that's not really good.

Phil Bredesen: Or immigration or something, that has nothing to do—

Bill Haslam: With the County Commission.

Phil Bredesen: With the County Commission. Right. I think this has been a good one.

Bill Haslam: I've learned.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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