



**February 29, 2008**

**BILL MOYERS:** Welcome to THE JOURNAL.

'Tis the season for images, and I'm not talking Oscars. Presidential campaign ads are saturating the airwaves. You've seen them. Clinton's in Espanol, McCain's POW ads, and Obama's rock star videos. Each tells a story but there is more than meets the eye. What are they supposed to convey, and do they really move people the way their creators hope?

Tonight, we'll take apart, we'll deconstruct some of the images whose messages you may be receiving without knowing it. Here to help me is our expert discerner, our resident scholar of spin, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Are you ready?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** I'm ready.

**BILL MOYERS:** I'm seeing spots before my eyes. I mean, Obama has spent-- seven million dollars on cable and TV ads in Texas and Ohio. Hillary Clinton has spent four million dollars. According to the WASHINGTON POST this week, Obama has run 57,000 30-second cable and TV spots. And Hillary Clinton has run 31,000 cable and TV spots. Why so many ads when the object next Tuesday is to get out the vote? They seem still to be trying to get out their message.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** Well, they're trying to do both. And part of what's interesting about those numbers is they obscure something that's very important, that's happening. Those numbers are talking about the old way in which we looked at politics. When we look at the National Annenberg Election Survey, which is the survey at the University of Pennsylvania, and we asked: In the last week, have you gone to YouTube to find political content?-- more than ten percent of the national sample says they have. YouTube, the Internet has become a major means of communicating about candidates, in addition to the mass media channels.

And part of what they're doing on this channel is different, candidate to candidate. So when you look at the ads for Barack Obama across the recent primaries and caucuses, in some of those ads, you see an instruction that I bet went past you when you saw all those spots. And certainly, it passed me, until I asked one of the students what it was doing there. It says, "Text hope." And then it gives you a number.

**BILL MOYERS:** Wait. Text H-O-P-E

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** H-O-P-E, the theme of the Barack Obama campaign and then, a number. That's a communication to say if you have text messaging on your cell phone, text in "hope" and that number. And the Obama campaign begins to communicate directly to you. You're putting in a zip code, and it tells you where the nearest rally is, when you're supposed to be voting, when the caucus is being held.

And so, the channels of communication this year are highly diverse. And then there's one more. I'm in Pennsylvania. We've been watching the internet communication that candidates deliver through E-mail. Now, why would they want to text message, rather than E-mail? Remember, Pennsylvania primary, 22nd of April-- have been instructions about how to get together in order to be trained to participate in the volunteer pool to get people to the polls. That's a form of advertising. Text messaging advertising, Internet advertising. And then, an unprecedented amount of money on the air. This is a year in which there's been more communication than ever in the history of primary, to more people about candidates.

**BILL MOYERS:** Aren't these text messages going to kids who aren't old enough to vote?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** They may be. But they're not going to people who aren't old enough to volunteer. There's no age barrier to volunteering. And what's important also, in the advertising stream this year, is that there is advertising to the young about issues of concern to the young.

The Obama campaign has pioneered this. There is one Hispanic language ad for Senator Obama, in which a young person basically explains why it's important to get your parents involved for Obama. We know there's a generational divide. Older voters, more likely, particularly older women will be with Senator Clinton, younger, with Senator Obama. This is a trickle up theory. Get the young to influence their parents.

**BILL MOYERS:** I went online to listen to some the ads in Texas. And there's one in Spanish for Obama that's remarkable. It-- a lot of young people are in it. And you hear this-- this singer saying-- "Como se dice, como se llama, Obama, Obama." Which means, "Who is this, what's his name? Obama, Obama." It's very effective.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** There's another that basically runs through every identifier you could possibly have if you're Latino. So it basically says, if you're from Brazil, if you're from and then it lists one country of origin after another. And what do we have in common in this Spanish language radio ad? We're all supporting Obama.

The level of communication to the Hispanic community this year is going to be higher than it's ever been in history as well, in part, because that's a voting bloc that is not only contested strongly on the Democratic side, with an early advantage to Senator Clinton. And Senator Obama would like to take that away. But also, that's a voting bloc that is open for realignment. It could come to one party or the other this year over the immigration debate.

**BILL MOYERS:** What can ads do that speeches and debates and news stories can't do?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** Because advertising lets you speak in someone else's voice, and speak with visuals and with audio materials and with music, ads are able to attach emotion to a story that tells voters who you are without making it look as if you're self-aggrandizing.

**BILL MOYERS:** A biography?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** A biography. And back to the earliest days of politics, biographies-- literally, print biographies were written and distributed to tell people who the candidate is who is contesting for the presidency. The biographical ad is a staple in political campaigns. And it's important for a number of reasons.

First, we elect a person, not a set of issues. And we elect a person who will act in unanticipated moments. And you want to know, as a result, as a voter, who is it? Can I trust you? That on the attributes that are most salient in an election, does this person have them? And some attributes are a constant. Leadership is one of them. Some are actually featured in some elections and less so in others. Before 1976, candidates weren't claiming that they were honest. They were presupposing that they were honest. After Watergate, Jimmy Carter built a campaign on it, as did then incumbent President Gerald Ford.

**BILL MOYERS:** And that's BC, before Carter, right?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** Yes. And so, what a biography is able to do is to say this is where I come from, this is what motivates my candidacy, this is who I am. It also provides the rationale that links the person to the issue positions, and the person to the claim, I will keep my promises. So, for example, in the historic past, what you've seen is candidates who have tried to translate a moment in biography into a claim that that moment credentials them to be president. For Dwight Eisenhower, it was the hero of World War II.

**BILL MOYERS:** Right.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** And then, a biography tells you something you didn't know. It fills in to create a rebuttal against something that might be a vulnerability.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** He's the man from Abilene.

**Announcer:** The Man from Abilene! Out of the heart land of America out of this small frame house in Adeline Kansas, came a man Dwight D. Eisenhower. Through the crucial hour of historic D- Day he brought us to the triumph and peace of historic VE Day now another crucial hour in our history. The big question:

**Reporter:** General if war comes, is this country really ready?

**Eisenhower:** It is not. The administration had spent many billions of dollars for national defense, yet today we haven't enough tanks for the fighting in Korea. It is time for a change!

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** So you don't have to be afraid that the general exercised military power without respect for civilian roots -- The Man from Abilene. And so, the ad that launched that candidacy took away the fear that a general might be too military, might be too high brass for the country. He was a civilian at core.

**BILL MOYERS:** As you speak, I'm reminded of an ad I saw of Obama's this week. And there's one line in it that struck me as eccentric. It's a line in an ad where he says, "And my father left me when I was two years old." And I thought, why does he want us to know that? No other reference to it. But it's right there, prominent in the ad.

**OBAMA:** My parents weren't rich. My father left me when I was very young. The one thing I was able to get was a great education. We should give every child the same chances that I had. By investing in early childhood education and recruiting a whole new generation of teachers.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why do you think he's saying that?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** We want to know where a president comes from. And there are two very different stories in biographies of presidents. There's a president who overcame all odds to be in front of us as a prospective nominee. That's Bill Clinton, that's Jimmy Carter. That's Barack Obama.

**BILL MOYERS:** The boy against the odds?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** The boy against the odds. And what is a greater odd than a child raised with only one parent? And what does it say when Barack Obama features the fact that he was raised by his mother? The heroism of the woman. And by his grandparents. In his speech, he basically reinforces that. Raised by his mother and by his grandparents. But what did he have in both of these stories, what he tells in his speech and in the ad? He had access to education. Now, here the ad certifies the prospective presidency and ties to issues.

**BILL MOYERS:** Like Clinton goes off to Yale; Obama goes off to Harvard.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** He goes off to Harvard. He then comes back to serve his community. Both Clinton and Obama, in their life story, made a choice not to go on and become wealthy with their Ivy League law degrees. Instead, to go back and serve their community.

The Obama ad does something else. His ad tells you, and his speeches tell you that education is what made his life possible. And what does he want to do as a result? He wants to guarantee quality education. He wants to have high quality teachers. Now, a theme of the campaign, a promise in the presidency, is pulled out of biography and is given credibility for that. It's motivated by the life story. That's effective biography.

**BILL MOYERS:** Interesting. There's one of Obama's ads that I call the Woodstock ad. Let's take a look at it.

**OBAMA:** I'm Barack Obama and I approve this message. We want an end to this war and we want diplomacy and peace!! Not only can we save the environment, we can create jobs and opportunity...

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** This is a momentum ad. Look at all of those people supporting me, and the music is underscoring that. But why would you call it a Woodstock ad? And do you think that makes any sense to anybody who's under 50?

**BILL MOYERS:** No, but it makes sense in the cultural wars, because the conservatives will want to come after Obama the same way they came after Bill Clinton. Because he represents the drive, the leftist divide on the other side of the chasm of the 1960s.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** What do you see in that ad that you hear as leftist divide?

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, stop the war, save the planet. The music, the massed-- the thronged crowd.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** So what you're doing is saying, I hear this message as a message like the message of the 1960s.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** And I identify that with Woodstock.

**BILL MOYERS:** But I see it in terms of the conservative attack in the '80s, and the '90s, on the Clintons.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** I hear that ad as the expression of all of the ideals of the young for a future that is different, in which we don't assume that we can't accomplish these large objectives. And we can envision a different kind of world. I see that as a mobilizing ad that is trying to communicate with its visuals that there is an army of the young ready to embrace this kind of change and help to work to make it possible.

But what that illustrates is, people create meaning out of messages based on their own repertoire of experiences. And some people will see an ad one way, and some people will see it in a very different way.

**BILL MOYERS:** But what I'm saying is that Woodstock, for conservatives, has a very negative connotation that they use against liberal Democrats of a certain age.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** What Woodstock in that context, means, you know, sex, drugs, rock and roll. I mean, it's like sex, drugs, and alternative music, challenge to the establishment, kinds of behaviors that would make, you know, the middle of America-- some people of middle America being at Woodstock nonetheless-- but would make them cringe. So that's the symbolism wrapped up in Woodstock.

And it's referenced in the Republican side when John McCain says that he wasn't at Woodstock. He was, you know, tied up at that point.

**RUSSETT:** McCain spent five years, in a box. Baking in the heat.

**ROEMER:** Broken bones. Torture. Mistreatment. Malnourished.

**BUD DAY:** I took one look at him he weighed about 95 pounds and I said these people dumped this guy on me so they could claim that we let him die.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** That's a web ad. And it was put in place not to be aired nationally, but rather, because in the South Carolina primary, an individual was making allegations about Senator McCain's POW service. The McCain campaign edited this together

as a rebuttal. Reporters were encouraged to go and take a look at it. Senator McCain never then had to put in place any of that in public.

**BILL MOYERS:** He didn't have to answer it?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** He didn't have to answer it.

**BILL MOYERS:** The ad spoke for him.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** And the most powerful thing that can happen with any communication is that something emerges on your radar screen, and the audience draws in the rebuttal on its own. You never want to say, "I am the hero." You never want to say, "I underwent all of this." It sounds self-aggrandizing. You want someone else to say it. And you want the audience to fill it in on its own when the charge is raised. So someone else has to do this.

In the case of that web ad, they have Tim Russert doing it, along with POWs who were there with him in the Hanoi Hilton. That's a very effective use of the web. And it wouldn't have been effective had it been mass mediated ad.

**BILL MOYERS:** If Obama's biography in the ads you've been watching is the boy against the odds, what's the biography you see in McCain's ads?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** McCain falls into the other tradition. A person who came into a family with a long military tradition, and very distinguished military tradition. And has to make the decision about whether he's going to be part of that tradition. He enters the military, he is shot down. And he has a chance to make the decision about whether or not he's going to be released. Because his Vietnamese captors find out who his father is. And there would be propaganda value to them-

**BILL MOYERS:** His father's an admiral.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** His father's an admiral. His father actually has to make the decision about whether or not the site that the son is at is going to be bombed. And his father makes the decision that it's going to be. Now you have the stuff of movies. This is a lot like PT 109 for John Kennedy. The natural narrative under this is almost filmic. The father makes the decision. The son hears the planes dispatched by the father. He might actually be killed in that bombing.

In that context, this is the story of the young man born to privilege who decides to serve, and becomes a hero. Because he suffers torture, because he does not take the release that is offered. And then, chooses to come back and represent his country. The natural extension of that is he continues to serve and he becomes president. And so, his story is one of the transformation that occurred in the Hanoi Hilton motivating a life of service that culminates in the presidency.

**BILL MOYERS:** There's a subplot to McCain in the ads I've been seeing. And- it is this idea of the old soldier called back, you know, to serve his country again. Right? Do you see that in these ads?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** The rebuttal for Senator McCain to the challenge that he is too old to be president-- and interestingly, a Pew poll shows that when people are asked for open-ended responses to Senator McCain, old is coming up as one of those responses.

**BILL MOYERS:** Ageism-- creeps in.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** Or age as an issue comes in. The question then becomes, can your biography rebut that charge? The way Senator McCain tries to do that is 35 years of service starting with the the time I raised my hand to enter the military. And I've been there in every major foreign policy moment in between.

The underlying question then becomes, do you want all of that experience-- that's the pivot-- or do you want the comparative inexperience of my opponent? Age translated into experience. Because the vulnerability for Senator McCain is not simply the question of age, which he tries to transform with that rebuttal from the biography. But rather, that people feature Keating Five.

**BILL MOYERS:** The Keating Five. That's the savings and loan scandal in the 1980s, in which-- McCain was implicated with one of his big contributors, right?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** And not notice how, when I said Keating Five, you filled in a- story. The story that you filled in is a story that doesn't help Senator McCain. And then, if you piece into that story his rebuttal to the NEW YORK TIMES allegations, had him not meeting with someone he may, in fact, have met with, now you've begun to take a story into this narrative of heroism and principled determination.

**BILL MOYERS:** That undermines him?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** That undermines him.

**BILL MOYERS:** Eats away at it?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** Eats away at it.

**BILL MOYERS:** So Obama's ads and McCain's ads are telling us the life story in short verse, that Obama and McCain want us to know about? A biography being written in front of our eyes. Are you getting the same biography are you getting a biography from Hillary Clinton's ads?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** No. And very early in the campaign, Hillary Clinton said in her speeches that she was the most famous person you didn't know. That would have been an invitation to create the ad that gave you the biography that wasn't part of your public experience of the Clinton presidency.

Middle class girl from middle class family in Chicago. Father was a veteran. So what she needed to do at the very beginning of the campaign in an ad, was tell the biographical story that answered the question, who were you before you married Bill Clinton? Who were you in the White House? Were you a co-president or were you something else? What did you agree with? What didn't you agree with?

**BILL MOYERS:** What we know about Hillary Clinton is what other people have told us.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** What we know about Hillary Clinton is what we lived through in the Clinton administration, what we've read in the press. And it's a very strong narrative that doesn't create the coherent biography that she could be using right now to answer some of the charges to which she's vulnerable.

**BILL MOYERS:** Hillary Clinton has what I think is an effective ad in which she presents herself-- she's not talking. She's listening. You know that ad?

**ANNOUNCER:** for every soldier who served so bravely over there, but is ignored over here, she hears you. For every national guard and reservist who leaves their family behind, she hears you. That's why Hillary Clinton reached across the aisle to expand access to health care for the national guard and is pushing to protect the bonuses of wounded soldiers.

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** There's a story under that sense, of who Hillary Clinton is. Because that was the basic argument she made when she ran for Senate. Let me read you a line from the NEW YORK TIMES, from March 6th, 2007, that tells you what one construction of Hillary Clinton is, as opposed to another. THE NEW YORK TIMES, March 6th, 2007. "As a Senate candidate in 2000, Mrs. Clinton embraced the role of an attentive listener. As opposed to the power hungry climber many have suspected."

In Hillary Clinton's biographical past is the health care reform efforts in 1993-94, in which she is accused of conducting a process that was closed door, that didn't bring the friends that might have been there to help her, into the room to help work it out. Hillary Clinton, who is accused with Bill Clinton, of not working through the compromises with those who had legislation pending that might have worked with the Clinton proposal, to ultimately produce health care reform in spring of 1994.

So, closed, secretive meetings. Climber, aggressive, calculating. Hillary Clinton-- Hillary Clinton, the listener. That campaign was built on it. There's a ad in this election that reprises that theme. And if you're gonna say you're a listener, what does the ad have to do? It has to show you listening.

**BILL MOYERS:** It also reveals an empathetic person, - a woman with a- nurturing quality, right?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** And if you have to do two things as a woman seeking the presidency, certify that you're tough enough to be Commander in Chief, and at the same time, caring enough to be an authentic Democrat, and also to be an authentic woman. It's important for Hillary Clinton to not lose track of that second message.

The attacks against her all go to that facet of her biography. They suggest that yes, she's tough. But tough equals calculating. Tough equals secretive. Tough equals-- and then fill in all of the stereotypic blanks, and also all the pieces of the biographical past that include closed door meetings on the health care reform initiative.

**BILL MOYERS:** There was an interesting appearance by her in Youngstown, Ohio, earlier this week, when she was given a pair of boxing gloves. And she turned that into a symbol, right?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** The problem with boxing gloves is it's the wrong kind of fighting. First, a woman's naturally disadvantaged the minute you go to a boxing metaphor. But more importantly, that moves into a game reference point, not to the point that she highlights in one of her ads, in which she features the fighter theme, but she showed her identification with people who came back from the National Guard. And it identifies her with her issue position, fighting to get them benefits.

**BILL MOYERS:** There was a Hillary Clinton ad this morning, Friday morning, on THE TODAY SHOW.

**ANNOUNCER:** It's three AM and your children are safe and asleep. But there is a phone in the White House and its ringing. Something is happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call. It is someone who already knows the worlds leaders, knows the military; someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world. It's 3 AM and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering the phone?

**CLINTON:** I'm Hillary Clinton and I approve this message.

**BILL MOYERS:** So how do we measure the effectiveness of an ad?

**KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON:** You measure the effectiveness of an ad by whether, after seeing the ad repeatedly aired, people are more likely to see as important the issue that is featured in the ad. Whether the attributes of the candidate that are being offered are more important to the voter than they were before. Whether the voter is able to feel the impulse to go into the voting booth and actually cast the vote.

Because there's an element of emotion in all of this. And if an ad is successful, you come away confident that that's the person you want in the unanticipated moment in the Oval Office making the consequential decision. Good ads actually manage to increase the likelihood that you have that feeling. Ads that don't do that have largely failed to do what advertising is capable of doing, if advertising has a candidate with a strong biography and a strong record.

**BILL MOYERS:** Kathleen Hall Jamieson thanks for being with us.

**NOTE: NOT ALL STATIONS WILL AIR THIS SECTION OF CONTENT:**

**BILL MOYERS:** It's time once again to take a look at some of the comments you've been sending to us at the JOURNAL. You've been writing and we've been reading.

When Dennis Kucinich and Ron Paul were excluded from participating in their parties' presidential debates, we brought them on our show to give them a chance to speak their mind.

**RON PAUL:** There's indeed a lot of people would like to exclude me from the Republican Party. But the party is awful small. Why would they want to exclude is, if we want to work within the Republican Party?

**DENNIS KUCINICH:** This is about the right of the American people to hear a real discussion on the issues that affect their lives and to see if there's anybody out there who relates to their practical aspirations.

**BILL MOYERS:** Many Of You Chimed In With Your Own Thoughts:

*It's so refreshing to listen to candidates who are obviously intelligent and base their policy recommendations on a consistent moral vision...Even though they have opposite views of what role the federal government should play, they are both straight talkers who understand and speak for ordinary Americans...*

Jon Ralston

*It's disingenuous to discuss candidates that are ignored in our corporate duopoly election system without mentioning or actually interviewing Green Party candidates... For all the indifference shown to the Green Party by the corporate press and derision by the so-called progressive press, the fact is the Greens have 234 elected officials in 28 states...The Greens are growing, whether you know it or not; whether you like it or not.*

Carl Lundgren

*As long as we allow corporate media to decide our leaders we will have a corporate president. Just follow the money and you will have a president whose only interest is maintaining the status quo of big business and Wall Street enjoying great wealth while the rest of America is facing a deep recession and the middle class is dying...*

Varda Burns

**BILL MOYERS:** Noted scholar and author Shelby Steele gave us a bracing look into How Barack Obama's candidacy is shaking up the rhetoric of race and politics in America.

**SHELBY STEELE:** And a part of the infatuation with Obama is because he's something of an invisible man. He's a kind of a projection screen. And you sort of see more your - the better side of yourself when you look at Obama than you see actually Barack Obama.

Mr. Steele is obviously a brilliant man. While this country's shame is its treatment of African Americans, perhaps the greatest tragedy is this good man's completely jaded view.  
Jerry Day

*Shelby Steele dares to critically examine the Obama candidacy... The notion of an "Invisible Candidate" resonates, as does the reference to a hollow rhetoric of "Hope" and "Change". This Obama love fest is something more appropriate for a rock star than a serious contender for the presidency. It makes both the electorate and the media look foolish. Now will the Real Obama please stand up?*

Tessa Gordon

*In my view, Shelby Steele...is unable to trust the fact that Obama has a view of American society that is not crippled by America's segregated past...I do not know whether Obama will be president, but I am grateful to see him and the many others of his age (of all races and genders) compete with such confidence. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream is coming to*



*fruition.*  
Bert Isaacs

**BILL MOYERS:** And in a recent essay, I explored what the investigation of steroid abuse in major league baseball reveals about america as a whole.

**BILL MOYERS:** Suppose our national past time has become our national pathology? Ours is a society on steroids, and we're as blind as baseball's owners were a decade ago.

*As someone who's never given a hoot about baseball -- or any team sport -- it's always been immaterial to me whether athletes take drugs or not...By contrast, we're all embroiled in the larger political/economic/ethical issues you raise and...I'm not sure it's fair to compare a rigged system that victimizes almost everyone with narrow areas of endeavor that needn't occupy our attention unless by choice.*  
(The Other) Katharine Harris

*Baseball is indeed a barometer for things American, and this essay confirms how dire the deviations of the sport have been. Do we watch the sport or are we watching the juice? The sense that the game must be played fair is a casualty of the struggle to win at all costs, and this ethical erosion rots the roots of America.*  
L. White

**BILL MOYERS:** Keep telling us what you think of the broadcast - by [mail](#), [e-mail](#), or on the [blog at pbs.org](#).

**BILL MOYERS:** Yesterday, Hillary Clinton stopped off at a chain restaurant in Ohio and posed with waitresses in a gesture of working class solidarity. Earlier this month, Barack Obama was down on the floor of a titanium factory, meeting with workers in hard hats as the cameras rolled. This kind of campaigning has the moneyed class reaching for a word that strikes dread in the hearts of Wall Street and K Street: the word is populist. Here's the headline the NEW YORK TIMES used: quote "before votes, democrats deliver populist appeals." And here's the editorial page editor of the WALL STREET JOURNAL, where bubonic plague would be more welcome than populist sentiments.

**PAUL GIGOT:** Welcome to THE JOURNAL EDITORIAL REPORT. In Ohio and both Obama and Clinton have taken on a markedly populist tone.

**BILL MOYERS:** Populism grew up in America. During the first gilded age - back at the turn of the 19th century huge discrepancies in income and power separated a minority of very rich people who ran the country and everyone else. Then the disparities led to strikes, riots, labor unions, and government regulation of big business.

And today -- Well, that's what I want to put to Nell painter, one of our country's distinguished historians. Her grassroots history of the populist and progressive era in American life - STANDING AT ARMAGEDDON -- will soon be out in a second edition. It's a sweeping account of America's shift from a rural and agrarian society to an urban and industrial one, when regular people had to fight for their place in the new order. Nell Painter has retired from Princeton University where she was long one of the most popular teachers, but she's active on many fronts, and serves as President of the Organization of American Historians.

Welcome to THE JOURNAL.

**NELL PAINTER:** Thank you.

**BILL MOYERS:** Everybody's throwing around the word populism. Do you think they know what they're talking about?

**NELL PAINTER:** It sounds as if people who are throwing it around are throwing it around as a dirty word. And if it is a dirty word, they don't know what they're talking about.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why do they think it's a dirty word?

**NELL PAINTER:** I think they think it's a dirty word, because it pits Americans against each other, as if we would all be hand in hand if it weren't for populist agitators.

**BILL MOYERS:** What are Hillary Clinton and Obama saying that makes people invoke the word populism?

**NELL PAINTER:** They're probably talking in very veiled terms about class issues. Class is the dirty little secret in the United States. We're so much happier talking about race. Black people are this. And white people are that. The unspoken is that white people are middle class and black people are poor. So, black people are kind of the proxy for poor people in much of our dialogue. So, when politicians get past that, and they talk about what's interesting or needed for working people, or heaven for bid, poor people even, remember working people, or heaven forbid, poor people are probably about three-quarters of our population, at least. But when you talk about that group of Americans as having interest that are different from the people who have a lot of money, then for many who are critics of populism, that's a bad thing to point out.

**BILL MOYERS:** Actually, you know, when John Edwards was still in the race, he was using talk that also calls the money class, the financial interest would describe him as a populist-

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** --and his message is populism--

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes. And they--

**BILL MOYERS:** --and they kept--

**NELL PAINTER:** --they said he was so angry.

**BILL MOYERS:** Yes. Why?

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** How do you explain that?

**NELL PAINTER:** I thought that his line was right on target. However I keep thinking back to the late 19th century when, in slightly different terms, the political rhetoric pitted identity of interest, in which all Americans found their place in an order, and some smart, rich people decided what to do and the rest of people went along with it, the workers and so forth.

That was one way of talking about the American polity, the American citizenry. But another way which came out of the People's Party, out of the Farmers' Alliances and the Grange and the Green-backers, all of these groups were saying, "Our interests are not the same. And the money power-- money power or later in the early 20th century, the plutocracy; that those people were acting in their own interests, not in ours."

And you see it even in what topics are considered interesting and important. So, on one side at the current moment, we have discussions of war, and terrorism and security. That is America's place in the world. And on the other side, you have discussions of hard times, of expenses, of getting from day to day, of putting food on the table and so forth. Those are much more domestic issues. And in a very general way, those ideas, those strands, those issues go back 100 years.

**BILL MOYERS:** You quote in the forward of the new edition of your book from William Jennings Bryan, who said, I may not get it exactly right, he said, in 1899-- "America can

be a democracy-

**NELL PAINTER:** "A democracy-- --or an--

**NELL PAINTER:** --an empire." Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** And he didn't quite answer that. How would you answer it today?

**NELL PAINTER:** Well, we have become an empire. That came in the 20th century. What's between us and the populist is the 20th century: the Spanish-American War, the First World War, the Second World War, the Vietnam War and the two Iraq wars, to name a few. Those are all the wars that made us an empire in various, different ways.

But along with that, we still had what people face day to day. And what people face day to day, except for when they have a child, or a husband, or a spouse, or a mother and father actually in the war zone, what they face day to day is a different set of issues that have to do with health care, that have to do with wages, that have to do with that kind of issues. Which is much closer to life.

**BILL MOYERS:** So, what do you think we should know about the original populist, the movement that grew up in the 1890's, 1880's and 1890's? What should we know today that's relevant about them for us?

**NELL PAINTER:** How much time do you have?

**BILL MOYERS:** This is television.

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** It's like a classroom.

**NELL PAINTER:** Okay--

**BILL MOYERS:** You know? You have a fixed time--

**NELL PAINTER:** One thing-- one thing I would definitely like us to remember is that the ideas that the populists put forward in the 1890's were considered harebrained.

**BILL MOYERS:** Harebrained?

**NELL PAINTER:** Harebrained. Crank ideas. But by the early 20th century, they were the ideas that came into, even our U.S. Constitution. Because we had to have amendments to make it possible to have an income tax, or the direct election of senators. The whole regulatory state of the mid-20th century grows out of roots in the 90's with populism.

**BILL MOYERS:** They wanted--

**NELL PAINTER:** --are.

**BILL MOYERS:** --they-- they wanted the monopoly's control, right? They wanted government to step in and balance the power of the industrial giants--

**NELL PAINTER:** That's the very fundamental point that in a moment of what we call laissez-faire, that is to say that the government was not very involved, and certainly was not involved with every day people, that the populists were saying, "People control the government. And people should have the benefit of the power of the government." All of those were populist ideas saying that the power of the people through the government should serve the people, not just the corporations or the very wealthy.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you see happening to ordinary people today?

People are waking up to what has happened to our country, not just in the last eight years, but probably almost since the end of the Cold War, maybe even before. That our interest as a security state, and as an empire are not necessarily our interest as citizens. We have become what my colleague Elizabeth Cohen calls, "A consumer republic." The populists talked about a producers republic. And our interest as consumers and our interest as citizens may be different. So I live in New Jersey, where the state of our infrastructure is very much in the forefront of our politics. Are we going to pay for infrastructure?

Pay for bridges, pay for roads and for intellectual infrastructure, pay for education, pay for colleges. These are not the kinds of things that Americans are going to go buy as consumers. But we need them as citizens of a polity. So many of the people who make the decisions, and finally, so many of us who vote those people in or out of office, so many of the people who are making the decisions don't need those services in the way many of us ordinary people need them. We need political leadership. And we voters need to vote for people who will provide that leadership. What I'm saying is that we need the engagement of citizens, of voters of ordinary people to push; to push back against the tremendous amount of money that goes into electing our representatives. It's not an accident that there's so much money in politics. And that politics tend to serves the needs of those who can pay.

**BILL MOYERS:** I brought a story with me hot off the press. And it says, quote, "The vast majority of African-American and Latino families, who have entered the middle class are either borderline or at high risk of falling out of the middle class together." This report is called *By a Thread*, published by the research group and Brandeis University. And it says about 95 percent of African-American and 87 percent of Latino middle class families don't have enough net assets to meet their essential living expenses for even three months if their source of income disappears.

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes. It's called disparities of wealth. Not just income, wealth.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean?

**NELL PAINTER:** Well, you mentioned the word assets. Wealth is family assets. It's your house. It's your car. It's your savings. It's your retirement. It's your life insurance. It's your cash. It's that very money that you can use in unusual times, whether a bread winner loses a job, whether somebody falls ill, whether a child has to go to college, or graduate school. To have the wealth to be able to get past month by month, I mean, that's crucial to stay in the middle class or to move up. Because families are so short of wealth.

**BILL MOYERS:** And what is-- what's the effect of this? What does it mean to us?

**NELL PAINTER:** The first thing it means is that families come under tremendous pressure. And you see it in the breakdown of families, the brittleness of family relations. You see it in children left home by themselves, because their parents are working two or three jobs at a time. You see it in people not being able to keep their families together, because of the stresses, the psychological stresses of hard times. And you see the culture taking the place of parents. And our culture, as you know is full of guns, and violence and sex. And so, we have lots of guns, and violence and sex moving in where parents might be if they weren't under so much stress. Some time ago people asked me, actually it was Democratic senators. They said, "What can we do about the black family?" And I said, "People need jobs. People need jobs." And if I were running the world, I would call back Franklin Roosevelt. And people would have jobs.

**BILL MOYERS:** You would do that instead of giving us all \$500 or \$800--

**NELL PAINTER:** Abs--

**BILL MOYERS:** --to spend for whatever we wanted to?

**NELL PAINTER:** To-

**BILL MOYERS:** Because?

**NELL PAINTER:** Because, well, to go back to the populist, to move us more towards the citizens republic than the consumers republic. As consumers, we are the prey of our own appetites. And as citizens, we think about ourselves and our larger community. You could call it the infrastructure way of thinking.

**BILL MOYERS:** What does it say to you that income inequality, which was a big issue in the populist era, grew significantly in the last year for which we had data, 2005? The top one percent of people, those with incomes of more than \$348,000 received the largest share of national income since 1928, the year before the big--

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes. It's frightening, isn't it?

**BILL MOYERS:** It is.

**NELL PAINTER:** It is.

**BILL MOYERS:** And what does that say to you?

**NELL PAINTER:** It says, "Oh! We're going to have another damn depression." That's what it says to me. And then I remember that we have a lot of safeguards in place that were not in place in 1929 and are in place now because of the disaster of the Great Depression. But then again, many of those safeguards have been weakened particularly over the last quarter century or so. So, the regulatory stays. I think that what we see, in terms of the credit crunch, it started with the sub-prime problem, but it spread throughout the whole financial sector is-- has to do with lack of regulation.

**BILL MOYERS:** So, what are the Bill Moyers-- Dr. Painter, that you think the populists would-- are asking us today?

**NELL PAINTER:** Well, the populists--

**BILL MOYERS:** The ghost of the populist?

**NELL PAINTER:** The ghost of the populist, or our own populist are asking us, "What is the role of the citizens in our economy? What is the role of the government in our economy? What is the role of the government for-- serving the needs of ordinary people? Who does the government serve, or should it serve?" And governments can work for people. I know that sounds really woolly-headed these days when government should be off our backs. Maybe government has been too far off our backs, so that it cannot serve our needs.

**BILL MOYERS:** You remind us in the forward to your new edition that this century, this period you were writing about, a century or so ago America was wrestling with this very  
**BILL MOYERS--**

**NELL PAINTER:** The very.

**BILL MOYERS:** --what is, or should be the relation between the power of money and the power of the people? How do you see that playing out today?

**NELL PAINTER:** I think we're asking exactly the same . I think that's at the heart of election reform, legislation-- public financing. I think it's also at the heart of questions about regulation. Do you let the free market run amok because it's good for all of us? And people are seeing, no. It's not necessarily good for all of us. Because we get tainted toys. We get downer cows processed into hamburger. So, the return of that kind of questions I think is saying that Americans are seeing the- are hearing the resonance of the questions, and perhaps even the answers of 100 years ago.

**BILL MOYERS:** As you talk, I'm reminded that what we owe the progressives and the

populists of that period you write about 100 and so years ago, we owe them the progressive income tax. We owe them the direct election of United State Senators. We owe them--

**NELL PAINTER:** The Federal Reserve System.

**BILL MOYERS:** --the Federal Reserve System, the over-sight by the government of unfettered, capitalist power. So, why did you call your classic book *STANDING AT ARMAGEDDON*?

**NELL PAINTER:** Because so many people in the late 19th and early 20th century actually felt that their world was collapsing around them. So, the idea of the end of the world, that was circulating. And over and over again, people were using that kind of language when they talked about the need for remedies. The term, "Standing at Armageddon," actually comes from Teddy Roosevelt. And Roosevelt, in 1912, when he ran as the progressive candidate for president, was rallying his supporters. And he said, "We stand at Armageddon. And we battle for the Lord." He was talking about delegates, mind you.

**BILL MOYERS:** Oh, he--

**NELL PAINTER:** It's a great line.

**BILL MOYERS:** Something akin to what's going on right now--

**NELL PAINTER:** That's right.

**BILL MOYERS:** --with the super delegates, right?

**NELL PAINTER:** Yes. Yes.

**BILL MOYERS:** It's interesting, isn't it, that Teddy Roosevelt and his cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, both men of property championed the cause of people against the big corporations?

**NELL PAINTER:** Because they realized that not standing up to gross economic power risked ruining their country, risked incredible disorder, risked asking for Armageddon. In-- after 1907, but certainly after the populist and after the great-- hard times of the 90's, and the strikes, and the riots and all the disorder of the great upheaval. Theodore Roosevelt realized that he couldn't just let the bankers and the railroads call the tune. Because they would run the country into the ground. Franklin Roosevelt, looking at the Great Depression, and the strikes, and the riots, and the marches realized once again that government would have to step in and put a hand on the side of ordinary people. That the system cannot run by itself.

**BILL MOYERS:** You are a historian. You're an historian, and not a prophet. But are we standing at Armageddon today?

**NELL PAINTER:** I don't think we're ever standing at Armageddon in the United States. Because we do have lots, and lots and lots of safeguards. And one of our safeguards is simply our huge size. Nobody can move us around very quickly. Everything takes a lot of time. I don't think we're going to have a revolution in the United States. So, in that sense, we're not standing in Armageddon. And we never will. However, we certainly are standing at a critical moment, in which we decide whether or not to continue as, in Bryan's terms, "An empire," or whether we want to return to our roots as a democracy.

**BILL MOYERS:** Nell Painter, thank you very much for sharing--

**NELL PAINTER:** Thank you.

**BILL MOYERS:** It may seem all eyes are on Texas and Ohio. And the ads running in those

two critical states, but as a very sober public television viewer you will be relieved to know that some perceptive and saavy newshounds are thinking ahead — looking at the fall elections — where the results could be very surprising. It takes intrepid reporting to find out what's going to happen before it happens — and The Onion News Network is nothing if not intrepid — and funny!

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