

Kelly Brownell:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm your host Kelly Brownell, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Speaker 2:

She lacks the competence to lead our country.

Speaker 3:

This isn't reality television, this is actual reality.

Kelly Brownell:

This is the start of the trailer from one of the most highly anticipated Frontline documentaries of the year. It is called The Choice and it premieres on PBS. The film takes a close look at Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, but rather than interviewing either Trump or Clinton directly, filmmakers interviewed the people around them, some of the people who know them best. The idea is if we can better understand where they come from and what shaped them, we will gain insight into what kind of president they would be. My guest today is one of the producers of that film, Phil Bennett, Eugene C. Patterson, Professor of the Practice here at the Sanford School. Phil has had a long history in journalism and has had a distinguished career. During his time as managing editor of the Washington Post, the paper won Pulitzer Prizes. Between 2011 and 2013, while he was on the Duke faculty, Phil served as managing editor of the FRONTLINE TV show. and this year, he's helped FRONTLINE produce this important film, The Choice. Welcome Phil.

Phil Bennett:

Thanks, Kelly. It's good to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

So, let me begin with a quote from the Wall Street Journal, they did a very favorable review of your film, and it says this, "Days before Monday's debate, exhausted Americans can be forgiven, a belief that they now know everything worth knowing about the lives and dispositions of the presidential candidates." "Still, it shouldn't take long for this FRONTLINE documentaries intense scrutiny of those lives, portraits of Washington facts, revelations and reminders of half forgotten the events to shake that confidence." So, I haven't yet seen the film because it's airing tomorrow, but how in the world can anything new be said about these folks, because there's been such enormous media coverage of them?

Phil Bennett:

Yeah. It's a great question. Well, we have this paradox and that we have this unprecedented campaign between someone who could be the first woman president of the United States and someone who's a complete political novice from completely outside the previous known solar system of American politics. So, we have an unprecedented situation, but we also have two figures who've been in the public eye for more than three decades, both of them in a very prominent way. So, you have that thing of the new and the old coming together. I think what we felt from the beginning was that this area of political biography, in other words, where somebody's personal life and their personal history intersects with their public life, and what's known is such a rich and fertile area, psychologically. You know what I

mean? It brings in their families, their closest relations, but also how they present themselves to the world, and how they understand the world and that the kind of territory we were trying to explore.

Kelly Brownell:

So, how long in the world do you choose who to interview?

Phil Bennett:

Well, this is a very intensive process. Because obviously, we had to wait for the primaries to play out before we could decide what the structure of our film was going to be. So really beginning in May, we hedged a little, but there are three producers on it. Then the Director, Michael Kirk has done this same series for PBS since 1988. So, he's got a method very much in mind. We become students of the two people, we read everything. We sit down for weeks and we read all the biographies. We're given giant briefing books of clippings from journalism. We go through those. But the real, so we have a foundation of the basic facts and timeline. We actually construct a chronology of each of the candidate's life, it's almost a thousand pages long, a very small type.

But then, what the main activity is, we go out and we interview. In this case, almost 60 people. And these are not standard sort of fly by interviews. We sit down with them, sometimes at least two hours, in most cases, sometimes four hours or more. And, we really walk them through their experience of these people. And what you find out of that process, like creating, it's almost symphonic in the end because you create such a rich, deep layer of voices and testimony about their lives that you come up with a portrait that feels new.

Kelly Brownell:

So, what sort of people did you decide to talk to?

Phil Bennett:

Well, as with all of journalism you decide and then they decide. So, we did ask to speak to people that didn't agree to speak with us. But we have a good record at Frontline of playing it straight. So, we do have success, if there are two opposing sides of an issue. We do have a lot of success at getting both sides to sit down with us and that was the case here. We decided that we never interview the candidates, because they're in the midst of the campaign. This is not a campaign film. It's not about their promises to the voters, it's not about their pitch to the country. And we would get nervous, we'd be afraid that those kinds of campaign style statements would hijack our effort. In the past, we've spoken with family members, mostly with candidates whose family members were not well-known. The Obamas, the Romneys. This time we didn't.

And it was partially a question of access, and partially a question that the families were both so much parts of the campaign in this case that they be surrogates for the candidate. So, we went back to grade school. Well, in the case of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, we spoke with people, their earliest friends and we worked our way forward. People from Wellesley, people who knew Trump in the New York Military Academy, where he went to, spent his high school years. And then colleagues, people they worked with very early ages right up through the present.

Kelly Brownell:

So I know with journalism, there's often the attempt at least to show both sides of a picture. So, if somebody might have said negative something negative about one of the candidates, typical journalism,

there would somebody brought aboard to say the opposite of that. Was there any of that in this? Or how did you decide what needed the counter position stated and things?

Phil Bennett:

Yeah, that's a great question. So, this is one of the challenges I've found in moving from print to film is that, you can't just drop in a sentence saying, "The other side says this isn't true or has a different point of view," so we're very careful about that. And, that's where our reporting comes in because we fact check this film. We don't... There's no one in it as far as I know, who says something that we haven't been able to substantiate. Now, people express their opinions, and their views and we allow them to do that, but we don't allow people to make statements of fact that we're not able to substantiate on our own. The only balance that we're very strict about adhering to is, we have an hour and 50 minute film and we make sure that both candidates, their stories are told in equal amounts of time.

And of course, that's a sort of artificial structure that we impose on these long enrich lives but we feel that, that's a necessary element of fairness. Within that structure, we go where the story takes us. We are not trying to create a sort of false balance about on the one hand. On the other hand, we're trying to, as best we can, excavate chapters of these individual's lives, which tells us something about their character and about what we call or what we think about as their life method. How they do things, how they make decisions, how they react to things that happen to them, and that's the area that we're most interested in getting people to talk about and bringing in archival footage, documents and other things to help create a full picture.

Kelly Brownell:

So, let's turn our attention now to what's in the film itself. When I was talking to you earlier, you had some amazing anecdotes that you learned in the process of producing this film. Could you give us an anecdote for Hillary Clinton and some for Donald Trump that were things that surprised you, things that might surprise people?

Phil Bennett:

Well, there's so many, I mean, they're extraordinary figures, apart from whatever people think about them. And, I think also because they're somehow emblematic of our polarized world, there are things we don't know about the person we may not favor very much and... But in this case, I think that both of them have parts of their lives that were really surprising to me, even if they were lying in plain sight. So for instance, Hillary Clinton's commencement speech at Wellesley, which has been written about, but it's not until you sort of see it and you place it in the context in which it occurred. This is really an extraordinary moment. So, she arrives at that, she's a senior in college. It's 1969. She's been touched by the events, she'd actually gone down with her high school, a grade school [inaudible 00:09:08] protest in Chicago during the 1968 democratic convention there. She's the first student selected at Wellesley to be the commencement speaker.

At this point, she was a young Republican, Goldwater supporter like her father through high school. So, she's still trying to figure out her political identity, but she's a star at the school. And so, she's selected for this position. The commencement speaker is Senator Edward Brooke, who's a African-American Republican Senator from Massachusetts. And, Senator Brooke gets up to the graduating class and he gives a speech to the people who were there sounding patronizing. Telling them, "They were children of privilege, they shouldn't protest, they should get to work, they shouldn't be spoiled." And in the eyes of the graduates, condescending.

Hillary is watching the speech. She gets up from her chair, you can see there's a sort of grainy Super 8 video of this. She gets up from her chair, she leaves her speech on her chair. She's taking notes during his speech. And, she stands up and she gives an ad lib commencement address, rebutting in a sort of point by point way the speech of Senator Brooke. Standing ovation from her classmates, a lot of disgruntlement from faculty and parents. In fact, the president of Wellesley writes Brooke an apology letter. But, it catapults Hillary into some celebrity. Her speech is on the front page of the Boston Globe the next day, student upstages Senator. And, life magazine picks it up and profiles in Life Magazine, which at the time was the most read magazine in the country. So interestingly enough, and I didn't know this, by the time she arrived at Yale Law School the next year, in a class that had many famous people in it, including Bill Clinton.

She's one of the most famous students in her first-year class. Everybody knows who she is. So, I think that you see these trajectories starting at a very early age and I think that that tells us something about her.

Kelly Brownell:

What about Trump?

Phil Bennett:

Very interesting childhood, raised in privilege. But privilege in Queens, so he's a New Yorker, but he's on the outside of power. And really, the story of Donald Trump's effort to get into Manhattan to make a mark in Manhattan, which his father, who was a very wealthy real estate developer was always unable to do, it was sort of the first initial struggle of his life. He grows up in privilege, he's got a paper wrapper, but when it rains, the chauffeur takes them around the car and he throws the papers from the back seat. But, he does have a sort of the episode in his life where his father, because he's so mischievous and rambunctious sends him to military school, toughens Trump up a little bit. He comes out and he's ready as a young real estate developer to go immediately into Manhattan. The story of Trump Tower is a really, really interesting story.

He identifies one of the premier pieces of land on Fifth Avenue. He engineers an almost unheard of tax abatement with the City of New York that enables him to build this building. He chooses a very striking design. He builds a building in concrete at a time when no one wanted to work in concrete in Manhattan, because the unions were seen as too difficult to deal with, so people avoided concrete. Donald Trump goes in and says, "He can deal with the unions." And, he does something very interesting, which is he hires a woman, a young woman to be the head of the construction on the project, a woman named Barbara Res and we speak with her. And he hires another woman, Louise Sunshine, to basically run the business end of that. So, it's Trump and two women. And, this is almost unheard of in the construction world in New York, to have a young woman in her 30s, Trump was barely 30 himself, overseeing a multi-million dollar construction project.

So, Trump tower is emblematic of a lot of Trump's traits, a lot of his ambition. But also, you see things in it that are... You can relate to the way that he portrays facts and the way that he tells his own story. I mean, in a way, Trump's whole life has been trying to construct a story about himself, which he's told over and over again in different settings. One of the features of Trump Tower that I learned in producing this film is that, while many people know that Trump and his family live in the penthouse, live on the top three floors of Trump Tower, which is labeled as the 68th floor penthouse of the building. Trump Tower only has 58 floors, and he misnumbered the floors on purpose to make the building seem taller than it is. And if you ask him about this, he will insist that the building is 68 floors. And we asked

Barbara Res, the construction manager, "How could he do that?" "Is that even legal to do in a construction project?" And she said, "She had no idea how he did it, but he got away with it."

Kelly Brownell:

Amazing story. So, it's been said that Hillary Clinton has to work on the perception that she's not trustworthy. Was that something you heard from people that knew her?

Phil Bennett:

So here's something interesting, and I'll try to give you a broader answer to this question too, because I think that there is some insight into the film and to this question. One of the interesting thing when you talk to people close to them and this is a generalization, I'm sure there are exceptions to it, people who are close to Hillary Clinton, who are her friends, who described themselves as her friends are really her friends. They are really close to her. They are incredibly loyal and they speak about her with a kind of love and affection that is really striking. And, we might not get the full expression of that in the film. We move very quickly through that. But, we're publishing long transcripts of many of our interviews on the PBS website, and you can go in and read some of the transcripts from the many women that she's been close to over the years. She has a sort of group of women.

At one point in the White House, they called themselves [The Chix 00:15:04] with a X and they were a group of people very close to Hillary who just... I remember asking one of them, "What was the thing about Hillary that most struck her, that most impressed her?" And this person, Lissa Muscatine, who was one of her speech writers said, "Her spirituality," which is not something that I think many voters would associate with Hillary Clinton, unless they knew her well or followed her closely. So you have on the one side, this group of friends and on the other side, Donald Trump's a lone Wolf. We see it in the campaign. He doesn't really have friends. When asked, "Who his friends are?" He has a hard time coming up with names. He's very close to his family, his family or his advisors. But as a result, we interview many people in the film who are his colleagues and associates, friends, the ghost writer of his bestselling autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*.

These are people with whom he's had fallings out, and are not close to him, are not friendly with him. So, you don't have that same experience of talking to people. They've spent a lot of time trying to understand Donald Trump and be able to explain him to you, but you don't have that same sense of friendship. The other thing I'd say about the trust issue and Hillary Clinton is, it goes back to the beginning. The theme that emerges, even from Hilary's childhood, is an idea of privacy and secrecy. It's just a theme that runs through her life through many, many episodes. But, the other theme that runs through it are people's very strong reactions to her, and there's a scene in the film of when she first arrived in Arkansas, which is a great story, which follows her then boyfriend, Bill Clinton to Arkansas, which shocked all of her friends.

But as the first lady of Arkansas, when Bill Clinton is elected the youngest governor in the country, there's a very strong reaction against her, among many voters in Arkansas, which is reminiscent of many things that we've seen since then in her political career. She goes after that, she rises to that. She changes in order to win back those people, this is a pattern that we see over and over again.

Kelly Brownell:

So, a lot of what's been said about Donald Trump by the fact checkers are that some of the things that he says during his campaign turn out to be untrue. Did any of the people that you interviewed address this issue?

Phil Bennett:

Yeah. It's hard not to. It's a pattern in his life since he was a kid. So one of the origins of, or one of the places where Donald Trump himself describes this is in his book, *The Art of the Deal*, we interviewed Tony Schwartz, who was the co author of that book. And Trump there coins, Schwartz says, "It was his phrase," but Trump embraces it, a phrase of truthful hyperbole. And, Trump sees this as a weapon that he can use as a way to make deals, as a way to put pressure on people and as a way to, again, create his own reality around... He's a reality television star. And, one of the reasons he became a star is because he created an image of something that wasn't real, that 27 million viewers turned in and connected with.

And, this is something that's not just incidental to the Trump personality, it's deeply ingrained there. And, he didn't just develop it out of nowhere, his earliest mentor in business, besides his father, Fred Trump, was Roy Cohn, the notorious New York attorney who had been the right-hand man of Joseph McCarthy during the anticommunist witch hunts of the 1950s. And he sees in Trump, a man on the make and Trump sees in Cohn, a guy who can teach him how to get things done. One of the things that Cohn teaches him is that when you are attacked, you go after the person attacking you with everything you have. And, that includes making up things about them, that's fair game. And, Trump internalized a lot of those lessons.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, now that you've produced this film, interviewed all these people and read thousands of pages of background material, what sort of impression does it leave you with about the state of American politics and where the country is in general?

Phil Bennett:

Well, I think that... You've asked me in a personal way, so I'll answer in a personal way. I've resisted over my career as a journalist trying to look at things as huge historic moments. Generally, we do that and then we find later that it was just like the biggest wave in that set, that the waves keep coming and in a sort of infinite succession. I've come to the view that this is just a pivotal moment in our history. I don't think it's going to be the end of time, but I do think that we're on the edge of potentially closing a chapter in American politics and history.

And because if Donald Trump is elected president, we'll certainly be going into unexplored, uncharted territory in our history with all the uncertainty that, that implies. If Hillary Clinton is elected president, we're clearly going to inherit all of the dysfunction that we have had over the last several years, plus whatever comes out of the very bitterly contested election we're in now. So, I have a really heightened sense of the importance of this. I'll tell you that I've spent... I feel like if anyone I know is entailed to be exhausted by these two people, it should be me, but I'm going to watch the debate tonight and as I think a hundred million Americans will too. And, that's because this is just really, really an important moment for the country.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, it's been a fascinating discussion. Thank you so much for joining us.

Phil Bennett:

Thanks Kelly.

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Kelly Brownell:

So, our guests has been Phil Bennett. Phil is the Eugene C. Patterson, Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.