

# The Undergraduate Journal of Social Sciences Interview Series

## *Paul Begala*

*Paul Begala recently visited West Point and took some time to share his knowledge with UJSS.*

*Mr. Paul Begala is known for his work as a Democratic strategist. Starting in the 1980s he ran a political consultancy firm, Carville & Begala, with James Carville and emerged as a powerful figure in national politics due to the prominent role he took in President Bill Clinton's successful campaign in 1992. Throughout the Clinton presidency, Mr. Begala served as an advisor and as the principal spokesman for the administration's policies.*

*After leaving the Clinton Administration, Mr. Begala worked as a research professor of government and public policy at Georgetown University. He also appeared as the co-host of CNN's Crossfire. Today Mr. Begala is a regular political contributor on CNN and an affiliated professor of public policy at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute.*

*Mr. Begala has also authored several bestselling books and holds a law degree from the University of Texas.*

**UJSS's George LeMeur and Orlando Zambrano sat down with Mr. Begala to discuss campaigning, presidential politics, former president Bill Clinton and much more. Here is what Mr. Begala had to say:**



**UJSS: In reference to Karl Rove's strategy of promoting the image of "the guy I would rather have a beer with," how does this strategy differ from your own, and how would you counter a campaign built on those premises?**

**PB:** "I think that's an element [of strategy] but it cannot be, *ought* not be the focal point. It's more feasible when there are no great issues of the day. Very often you have elections and there is not *that* much that's dominating. Then, it is up to candidates to put issues on the table, to put ideas forward, or a message forward. A very powerful message in life is 'he's one of us' or 'he's *not* one of us.' We all have a need to belong, a tribal sense of who we are and if someone does not fit in that tribe, it is very easy to reject them. So I understand that [strategy] but I think that President Bush discredits [it]. He is an acquaintance of mine in Texas, I like him, he is a good man and I would certainly have a beer with him, if he drank, but I think he has been a terrible president. So, simply being a regular guy is no longer enough. And there has always been that tension in America. We have never wanted a monarch, but, no one ever called General Washington by his first name. There is a certain conflict between our egalitarian impulse and our desire for excellence. It springs back and forth. [In the case of] Jimmy Carter, people called him Jimmy, he wore a sweater, he tried to be very accessible and I think that he was. Ronald Reagan was more the majestic image of the president. I think right now the image of 'I'd be the better guy to have a beer with' is soundly discredited."

**UJSS: As a political consultancy, why was your enterprise with James Carville so successful? How did you distinguish yourselves from other players in the market?**

**PB:** "A couple of things... we could not stand to lose. We were ferociously competitive, we never worked for anyone we didn't believe in, [and] we never did it for the paycheck. We always said, you get our time and our minds for the fee, but we throw our heart and soul in for free. We never expanded the business, we never had any associates, we never had any partners, it was all us. We thought the best way to maintain quality control was to make it our ass. We structured the fee arrangement so that we never got a percentage of the media buys or the other expenditures. So there was no incentive to inflate, say television advertising. We got a flat fee then we usually had a pretty hefty win bonus. You could keep body and soul together with the fee and then if we won it... My wife and I dated for eight years before I finally proposed. The only reason I was able to, was we finally won a campaign, we got a win bonus and I bought her an engagement ring. I wasn't going to borrow money to get engaged. So I think that's part of it, you have to believe in what you're doing and who you're working for. We had a very, very small number of clients. I think the most we ever had in any one year was two. So we didn't spread ourselves too thin. We lost our share, but it was never for lack of attention, focus, effort. I think that's what made us different. Even thinking about it now, my competitive juices are going again. I think politics is a lot more about will power than brain power and both Carville and I are, you know, not all that bright, but we're very strong willed people."

**UJSS: What would be some differences between campaigning for a well known candidate and a relatively unknown (in the context of McCain vs. Obama/ Clinton vs Bush)?**

**PB:** "Well, the advantage of an unknown candidate is it's 'tabula rasa' you get to write on it what you want. Very often, in the case of Obama, I think that voters projected what they wanted onto that screen. The *bad* of that is, the other side will project things on as well, and negative information sticks more easily on a lesser known candidate. The converse is true of a well known candidate, you cannot introduce new elements, but very often attacks don't stick because people will say: 'Oh, I know him. That doesn't sound like him...' So there are plusses and minuses with each. The most important thing is to understand who you are, what you stand for, who the other guy is, what he stands for, and to push those definitions. So Obama could have run a much more overtly racial campaign, (I think he wisely chose not to) in fact he put a premium on unity. I think he embodied his message of change, unity, and middle

class. He was definitely a change, he was change incarnate, he literally incorporated unity in the sense of physically being biracial, but also his every instinct seems to be to stitch together rather than divide apart. Of the middle class, he is very much a product; he is the ultimate product of the middle class American dream. He would say that, 'in no other country is my story even possible' that the biracial son of a single mother, who went on food stamps a couple of times to make ends meet could go to the best schools and aspire to the presidency. Those characteristics matter most: controlling who *you* are and who the *other guy* is while you are running."



**UJSS: In reference to negative politics, where is its place in a political campaign?**

**PB:** "First and foremost, [negative politics applies] in that the only acceptable message in a campaign is 'vote for me and not the other guy or gal.' Voting is a mutually exclusive choice, a zero sum game, it is *me* and not *him*. If you sing 'me me me me' like the fat lady in the opera then chances are, you are going to lose, that's why politics is rougher. I love negative campaigning, love, love, *love* it! *If* it is pure fact of the public record and relevant to something that affects the voters lives. I *hate* personal attacks, I hate someone saying: 'He's not a good father; he's not a good husband' the kind of stuff that was thrown at Bill Clinton for example. [I hate negative campaigning] for two reasons, most of all, it is unethical, but also [because] it doesn't work. I mean nobody has had more personal attacks waged on him than Bill Clinton and he won two *landslide* elections. Conversely, when Clinton was running against Bush Senior and Senator Dole, there weren't personal attacks... it was just: 'Bush did a bad job on the economy.' *Those* attacks are wonderful. If you look at the recent campaign, Obama attacked McCain *every day* but at the end of the day voters didn't think [Obama] ran a negative campaign, they thought McCain did. When voters and political reporters say 'negative' they really meant *personal*. Obama said 'McCain's health care plan will tax your health benefits and result in less [comprehensive] healthcare.' I happen to think [that is] true and I know that it is an attack, but it is about an *issue*. He didn't say 'McCain's a bad

daddy, or a bad husband, or a bad Christian, or a bad American.’ He just said ‘[McCain’s] healthcare plan is faulty.’ *That* is my kind of attack. Some of Senator McCain’s attacks, particularly some of Governor Palin’s attacks, were more personal. They didn’t work. People don’t like that.”

**UJSS: When faced with personal attacks, do you give them credibility by addressing them?**

**PB:** Very, very difficult... If you ignore them, then you give them credibility, but if you engage them only as it pertains to you, you sound self absorbed. Case in point, Senator Kerry, earned three Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star, and a Silver Star. *Five* major medals, he shed blood for my country and yet the Bush campaign suggested that he didn’t earn those medals, that he wasn’t the hero that he was. He purely ignored this, his advisors told him to. This was a huge mistake. People don’t know information they are not given, they are told lies... and they retain them. If all he had said was, ‘yes I earned these medals, look at all these medals, aren’t I a great guy...’ that doesn’t get my little brother a job when he’s out of work. So, I think the way you do it is touch on it and then make it relevant to the voter’s life. This is what Clinton always did: ‘Why are they attacking *my* life? Because they can’t do anything to fix your life.’ It’s actually true, you objectify it, you say: ‘why are they attacking my service 30 years ago? Maybe because they can’t defend their service in the White House these last four years.’ You use [the attack] as a vehicle to counter attack. It’s one of the basic rules, *never defend, always attack*. You always look at a way to use that attack against [the other party] as a counter attack. Had I worked for [Senator] Kerry (I did not) I would not have advised him to simply say: ‘I earned five major medals and my opponent was a draft dodger,’ because while true, that’s not a good reason to make someone president. The better reason is ‘they are trying to tell lies about me because they don’t want me to tell the truth about him, *and* the truth about *him* is he has made America weaker, made our economy softer, made *your* life harder.”

**UJSS: What was your strategy when running the Clinton campaign? How did it differ from previous campaigns?**

**PB:** “We were much more aggressive with Clinton, he hired a bunch of people who really had never worked in Presidential politics, who were not from Washington. He wanted a very issue oriented, aggressive campaign. He was squarely focused on the middle class and economic change. Carville put a sign up in the war room, it said ‘change versus more of the same, it’s the economy stupid, and don’t forget healthcare’ and that was it, that was the whole election. It was sharper, more focused, more aggressive, very much about ideas and issues, and I think that it was kind of different from previous democratic campaigns.”



**UJSS: After an introspective look into campaigning and advising for a President and existing in the center of politics in the United States, do you still believe in the American people? How easy was it in your position to develop a cynical view of politics?**

**PB:**“No, is the short answer. I am more idealistic today than when I started. I have been there; I have had the best seat in the house. Bush Senior was a good man, we ran a tough campaign against him, we won, I am glad we did. It did not make me hate *him*, the same thing with Senator Dole. When you get to know these guys, in the main, the more you come to admire them. The ‘good ones’ have a heart for service, a real concern about their country. So *I* have a less cynical view of politics. My side does not always win, and I am not always as happy with the way the voters decide things. But, I think [that] this is a miracle, when you have a country... that can produce a man like John McCain, who suffered grievously for our country, and is willing to continue to serve, or Barack Obama who is the ultimate product of the American dream. It ought to make you feel pretty good about your country, it is kind of hard to be cynical. The current president’s failures are heartbreaking and disappointing, they really are, and the damage he has done to our country will last a long time. This makes me sad but not cynical, because then I look and I see the two parties produce people, either one would bring more confidence and greater honor to the office. I think ‘well, maybe we have got it right, maybe the system does work.’ Yeah, we’ll have our mistakes but over the history of our country we make mistakes, but we also do one hell of a job of correcting them. So I come out of this more idealistic today than when I started twenty five years ago.”

**For More on Paul Begala see CNN.com:**

**[http://www.cnn.com/CNN/anchors\\_reporters/begala.paul.html](http://www.cnn.com/CNN/anchors_reporters/begala.paul.html)**

**DISCLAIMER:** The contents of this site, including words, images, and opinions, are unofficial and not to be considered as the official views of the the United States Military Academy, United States Army, or Department of Defense. Users accept and agree to this disclaimer in the use of any information obtained from this website.