

# THE LAST TOP DOWN CAMPAIGN

Joe Trippi

“ The Clinton campaign failed to grasp “it’s the network, stupid.” ”

It’s finally here. At long last, after waiting, evangelizing, strategizing, blogging and talking, networked politics came into its own during the presidential election of 2008. More than individual candidates losing, it was their old, creaky, top-down big-money methods of organizing and winning campaigns that was shown to be obsolete. We don’t have to wait to reboot American democracy; the revolution was won, here, now, today.

First I want to make clear that none of what I write here is aimed at some of the brilliant bottom-up thinkers in the Clinton campaign such as Peter Daou. The fact is that all the bottom-up thinking in the world will not break through the oppressive culture of top-down campaign management and a top-down candidate.

In 2008 we are seeing the strongest top-down campaign in the modern history of the Democratic Party. The Clinton campaign has been challenged and put on its heels by the Obama campaign, only the

second bottom-up presidential campaign in modern political history, after the Dean campaign.

The blunder that many will be talking about for a long, long time, will be how did Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton and the top of the Clinton campaign miss the fact that politics had irrefutably and irreversibly changed in 2004 and that the best path to the nomination and the Presidency was to deploy a bottom-up strategy in 2008? I had high hopes for Hillary Clinton. I really thought that she could be a transformational candidate, capable of inspiring millions of Americans to engage in the political process and change the country and our politics.

As early as 2006 I urged a Clinton confidant to enter the campaign for president by announcing that her campaign would not accept money from lobbyists or special interest PACS and that she would not accept any contribution over \$250 for her campaign. Challenge women to help change the country, I said, say “I believe there are 5 million women in America who are willing to give \$100 to my campaign to change our country and make it a better place for our children.” I would have continued, “Every woman knows that we are not the status quo—we are change.” Do the math, that would be half a billion dollars for her campaign, much more than Obama has raised in this campaign. I have no doubt that would have been a successful strategy.

The Clinton campaign liked the idea but she was not going to “unilaterally disarm against the Republicans.” They didn’t get it.

A month or two later, I was invited to explain bottom-up campaigning to Clinton’s manager and a few others. After excitedly explaining how Hillary could run a transformative campaign for change that could engage five million women and many of their sons, husbands, and fathers that would change the country and our politics—a campaign that would raise more in small contributions than any big donor campaign in history—I realized I was talking to a room that saw me as an oddball wearing a tin foil hat (not the first time this

has happened to me) and was politely shown the door. They didn't get it either.

There were a few high-level staffers in the Clinton campaign, Howard Wolfson and Jay Carson (Jay worked with me in the Dean campaign), who got it and tried to get others in the campaign to 'get it,' but the Clinton campaign was doomed to run a top-down campaign of the past. It might be a strong campaign, but, even so, it would be at great peril in the bottom-up environment of 2008.

Then the final shoe dropped. I was on a panel in New York City with Mark Penn, Clinton's chief strategist, and we were asked what the impact of the Internet would be on the 2008 presidential campaign. Penn answered the question first, and to my amazement and horror, responded that the Internet wouldn't have any impact on the 2008 presidential election because too few Americans use it and all they did was talk to each other!

The top of the Clinton campaign had no fundamental understanding that politics had changed since 2004. They did not understand that the second bottom-up networked campaign would be in 2008, and it would be explosively different from anything before it. The Clinton campaign failed to grasp "it's the network, stupid."

Barack Obama's campaign raised more money from the bottom up than any campaign in history—swamping the Clinton top-down \$2,300 maxed-out big donor fundraising effort.

But the difference between the campaigns is based on more than money. Barack Obama's entire delegate lead was due to his defeat of Hillary Clinton in caucus states. These victories are directly related to Obama's ability to activate a decentralized network of supporters who out-organized the Clinton campaign in state after state.

I was wrong about something, though. I really thought in the closing days of the campaign we would be watching the best top-down campaign in history matched against the second networked bottom-up

campaign in history. But in February, I heard something I never thought I would hear. Hillary Clinton was on television asking people to help her by going to [www.hillaryclinton.com](http://www.hillaryclinton.com)! Turns out the last top-down campaign on the Democratic side was already dead. Now Clinton has gone bottom-up, too. May the best bottom-up campaign win.

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*About the Author*

Joe Trippi began his political career working on Edward M. Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1980. His work in presidential politics continued with the campaigns of Walter Mondale, Gary Hart, Richard Gephardt and Howard Dean. Most recently, he was the Senior Advisor and Strategist for John Edwards' presidential campaign.