never overcome the limitations of his diffident personality. He was beaten by
George W. Bush, who was by far the savvier politician. Deep thinkers might
say Kerry was beaten by history since Democrats for nearly forty years had
been at a stark disadvantage when national security was the dominant issue
in voters' minds. Here is another nominee for who beat John Forbes Kerry:
Matthew Drudge.

If you are reading this book, you probably know who Matt Drudge is. It is
a guarantee that most of the reporters, editors, producers, and talk show
bookers who serve up the daily national buffet of news recently have checked
out his eponymous website, and that www.drudgereport.com is bookmarked
on their computers. That is one reason Drudge is the single most influential
purveyor of information about American politics.

Drudge, with his droll Dickensian name, was not the only media or politi-
cal agent whose actions led to John Kerry's defeat. But his role placed him
at the center of the game—a New Media World Order in which Drudge
was the most potent player in the process and a personification of the dynam-
ics that did Kerry in. Drudge and his ilk made Kerry toxic—and unelectable.

Toxicity is the new defining trait of modern American politics. The toxins
themselves are not new. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton initially
classed like gentlemen (albeit venomously) over the limits of federal power
and the future of the economy, but when news of Hamilton's sassy mistress
Maria Reynolds surfaced, thanks to derrisivist busybody James Callender,
Jefferson was content to let the accusatory pamphlets fly.

Anger, prurience, invective, conspiracy theory—all are native flowers on
the American landscape. What is new is the greenhouse in which these blos-
soms are cultivated and sold. This greenhouse was built on two beams. The
first was the disintegration of editorial filters in the Old Media, which in an
earlier age prevented the most salacious tales and bitter accusations (though
certainly not all) from entering the public arena. The New Media—talk
radio, cable television, Internet websites—for the most part never had these
editorial filters. Many of its leading voices, Drudge among them, are openly
contemplous of the very idea. The Old Media, faced with filter-free competi-
tion, responded by loosening or discarding its own.

This in turn helped promote, and was promoted by, the second beam, the
erosion of basic habits of decorum and self-restraint, in politics and media
alike. In an earlier generation, these habits meant that people more often re-
frained from fully expressing how much they loathed one another. In the cur-
rent generation, self-restraint is commonly regarded as a weakness and rarely

is rewarded economically or politically. The result is that the extreme and ec-
centric voices who always populated the margins of politics now reside, with
money and fame as the rewards, at the center. Michael Moore, please say hello
to Ann Coulter. The collapse of filters and the collapse of civility together
have changed the purpose of politics. The goal now is not simply to win, but
to persuade voters (and donors and viewers and readers) that an opponent
lacks the character and credibility even to deserve a place in the contest.
That is Freak Show politics.

Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were sitting on the stage in Little Rock
because they learned to navigate the Freak Show—and even to use it to their
advantage. Gore and John Kerry were sitting in the audience because they did
not. Were it not for the Freak Show, Kerry's title today likely would be
President of the United States. Instead Kerry's title is Case Study:

KERRY'S 2004 PRESIDENTIAL bid began in earnest, though unofficially, days
after the 2002 midterm congressional elections. These had been a disaster for
Democrats. Bush, invoking his party's credentials on national security, and
rewiring up a turnout machine run from the White House by Karl Rove, led
the Republicans to House and Senate gains. But the Massachusetts sena-
tor believed Bush might yet be vulnerable in his own reelection. What was
needed was a way to make plain to voters what seemed painfully obvious to
Kerry. Bush was an incompetent president. Kerry hired a campaign manager,
seealso Capitol Hill operative Jim Jordan, who set out with consultant Bob
Shrum and a wide circle of Kerry advisers to take inventory of the Democrat's
strengths and vulnerabilities. They might have been wise to start with his
hair.

By conventional measures, the thick mane atop Kerry's lean, craggy face
should have registered in the strengths column. His hair had grayed but not
receded by a single follicle over his six decades. Kerry was a bit vain about his
locks, and he gave them careful attention. As it happened, folks at the Re-
publican National Committee had been paying attention, too. Sometime ear-
lier, a nasty nugget of news raced around RNC headquarters. Wouldn't you
believe that Kerry gets his hair cut at the Washington salon of Cristophe? Yes,
exactly, that Cristophe—the same guy who did Hillary Clinton's hair. Cristophe
was also the stylist who was trimming Bill Clinton that time in 1993 when
Air Force One sat on the tarmac in Los Angeles for two hours while the
whole world cooled its heels (never mind that reports about delayed air traf-
cic turned out to be false).
No one at the RNC was surprised by the Cristophe news. Barbara Comstock, the party's savvy research director, had been in television green rooms with Kerry and witnessed him fussing over himself before going on air, utterly oblivious to anyone or anything around him. Jim Dyke, the party's communications director, sensed the Cristophe information would come in handy, and tucked it away for the right occasion.

On Sunday, December 2, Kerry publicly announced his candidacy to Tim Russert on NBC's Meet the Press. Ordinarily, this was the kind of news that would echo positively through the media for the rest of the week. With a well-timed placement, however, Dyke and his colleague Tim Griffin made sure that something else was waiting for Kerry, first thing Monday morning.

"" Exclusive"" promised the Drudge Report. "Cash and Coiff" read his headline, using the alliteration Drudge favors. "Democrat all-star John Kerry of Massachusetts is positioning himself as a populist politician while he takes the first step for a White House run . . . . But the self-described 'Man of the People' pays $150 to get his hair styled and shampooed—the cost of feeding a family of three for two weeks."

Like many Drudge Report exclusives, this one implied rigorous reporting, including direct quotations from well-positioned sources to whom the author supposedly talked on a not-for-attribution basis. In this case, it was a "stylist source," who allegedly told him: "When it comes to his hair, Mr. Kerry is very, very particular. The coloring and the highlighting, the layering. But the results are fabulous."

Drudge also claimed he had spoken to a "green room insider" at Fox News's Washington bureau: "It's always a fight to get mirror time. He obsessively primp and poses before he goes on the air."

Drudge items often quote from his roster of breathless White House insiders, top media "suits," or highly placed campaign aides, all furiously but authoritatively telling Matt Drudge the way it is. Does Drudge really get on the phone and converse with such people? Some in the Old Media speculate that he takes his tips from a single source by phone or e-mail, then creates hyperventilated quotes based on (entirely plausible) speculation about what someone somewhere probably is saying. The assumption that Drudge is casually embroidering his stories—which would be career-ending fraud for an Old Media journalist or author—has not caused reporters to remove Drudge from their daily reading. Whatever. It's just Drudge. And maybe he's got something there.

As Jim Dyke knew, any supremacy reporters and editors feel toward Drudge does not inhibit them from pouncing on his best items.

Within hours, the Cristophe story was everywhere. Rush Limbaugh chortled over it for an hour on his radio show. Later in the day, conservative commentator Pat Buchanan gave the website credit (“We learn from Drudge this morning . . .”) on his MSNBC cable show. Kerry’s team knew they had a genuine problem on their hands when they saw the next day’s newspapers filled with accounts of “Senator Kerry’s Bad Hair Day,” as one newspaper put it. A Kerry spokeswoman noted indignantly that Drudge had erred: The senator did not pay $150 for his haircut, only $75—Cristophe charges less for men. This gave Drudge a new hook. Why, he crowed, was the would-be president patronizing an establishment that practices sexism? Inevitably, the whole fuss caught the attention of Jay Leno. By the end of the week he was joking on The Tonight Show that the "winds were so strong yesterday" in Massachusetts that "John Kerry’s hair actually moved." Acknowledging that the line was a little lame, Leno explained, “You see, he’s running for president—I wanted to get the first joke in."

Leno’s tone suggested the ruckus over Kerry’s hair was all in good fun. And a sensible person might have paused to wonder how a candidate’s hair possibly could have any impact on a presidential race in an era of war, terrorism, and looming global calamity. But the Cristophe story was a serious portent of a much larger problem for Kerry, with which he would live almost daily for the next two years.

Presidential campaigns are about storytelling. A winning presidential campaign presents the candidate’s life story to voters. A losing campaign allows someone else to frame that story. In 1992, Bill Clinton’s race vividly exemplified the phenomenon of competing narratives. There was plenty in Clinton’s life to support his self-description as “The Man from Hope” an exceptional young fellow who grew up with few advantages but through brains and hard work had made a difference for his struggling Southern state. There was also plenty in that life to justify his opponents’ description of “Slick Willie”: a double-talking, temporizing, womanizing opportunist, whose private life and public record raised troubling questions about how he might behave in the White House.

In the end, more voters believed Clinton’s version of his story. Kerry’s personal life was not nearly as complicated as Clinton’s, but his political challenge was bigger. Clinton had a detailed agenda, which he cared about and helped create. This is not true of all presidential candidates. Even rarer, Clinton had been the dominant voice in crafting that agenda. The most under-appreciated assets in presidential politics are a coherent rationale and the