

Connor Mayers
Honors US History 2
10/17/16

Timothy, Mayers. Personal interview with the author. Conestoga, PA. October 16, 2016.

Overview by Connor Mayers:

Dr. Timothy R. Mayers was a young college professor teaching English at Millersville University in 2000. He had been living in Pennsylvania for two years after moving from Rhode Island for work. He was very concerned with the direction of our country at the time and made sure to pay attention to the presidential campaign that was happening that year so he could make an educated vote come November. He often cites the election as one of the most unprecedented events in our nation's history and still talks about it with enthusiasm today.

Question (C. Mayers): What is your earliest memory of the 2000 presidential election cycle?

Answer (T. Mayers): That's a good question. I guess, specifically related to that cycle, I remember that in the Democratic primary, I was supporting Bill Bradley, who was running against Al Gore, there may have been other candidates, but they were the last two who survived, and Bradley had been Senator in New Jersey, I had actually met him a couple times when I was in high school. I actually went to a leadership seminar that he sponsored. But he was to me a much better candidate for President than Gore, and so I was supporting him, but he lost, and then it was Gore on the Democratic side and Bush on the Republican side. Although I had voted for Ralph Nader in 1996, when Bill Clinton won re-election, I decided that even though I didn't like Gore that much, I would certainly support him over Bush because I had certainly remembered the presidency of his father, George H.W. Bush, and was not a supporter of the Iraq War which was one of the things that motivated me to vote for Bill Clinton in 1992.

Question (C. Mayers): What were the biggest issues at the time, not only for you personally, but also for the nation as a whole?

Answer (T. Mayers): It's hard to remember what was being talked about the most. I do recall that Bush and Cheney were arguing that the economy, which had kind of boomed through a lot of Clinton's two terms, this was in the early years of the internet and so the original, the .com companies were doing really well, a lot of the tech stocks were gaining a lot of value and a lot of money, the job market for most people was good, the economy seemed to be a lot better than it had been for a long time. But Bush and Cheney were warning that, as they saw it, things were going to turn bad, so they were kind of trying to, their argument seemed a little strange on what level that things are bad right now, but they are going to get bad, and so you have to elect us. As in a lot of elections, national security was a big issue. Obviously, 9/11/01 hadn't happened yet, but there had been smaller terrorist attacks throughout the 90s: the original attempt at bombing the World Trade Center, USS Cole, which was a ship somewhere in the Middle East if I remember

that was bombed when a group of terrorists sort of drove a much smaller boat up next to it and detonated a bomb. So there was, the idea that terrorism could be a danger was out there, and as they often do, the Republicans tried to argue that they would be tougher on that sort of thing, that was an issue. But Gore was pretty much, I saw him as a more interventionist or militaristic foreign policy guy. And when of the issues that Gore had staked a good bit of his career on was climate change, which people tended to call global warming more in those days, so that was an issue. But he was saying that there was a need to try and move away from fossil fuels and be careful or aware of the kind of footprint that human activity put on the atmosphere, and I don't remember specifically debates going into that, but since Cheney, the VP candidate on the Republican side had come out of the oil industry, to some extent so had Bush, they were less concerned with climate change of global warming in the sense of trying to curb fossil fuel use.

Question (C. Mayers): Who did you support throughout the election cycle and why did you support them?

Answer (T. Mayers): In the Democratic primary I supported Bill Bradley, because I thought he was by far the most intelligent and worldly out of the bunch on either side of the aisle. He had been, he had an interesting background. He had high academic achievements, he graduated from Princeton University, where he had played basketball, but then he was a professional basketball player for the New York Knicks for a number of years, and got into politics after his basketball career. But having heard him talk, having grown up in New Jersey where he was the Senator, having met him somewhat extensively one time and briefly another time, he just struck me as clearly the wisest and smartest out of the whole bunch who was available as a Republican or Democrat. He didn't win. I guess for a while, at some points during that cycle I toyed with the idea of voting for Ralph Nader as I had in 1996 when Bill Clinton ran for re-election, but in the end I ended up, somewhat reluctantly supporting Gore simply because I thought he was better than Bush.

Question (C. Mayers): What were some of the biggest milestone, landmarks, or turning points throughout this election season?

Answer (T. Mayers): Well I guess obviously the key moment in any primary is when a candidate sort of clinches the nomination or wins enough votes to more or less guarantee himself of herself the nomination. I hate to say this but I don't really remember exactly who some of the other Republican candidates were. I think John McCain was on the Republican side and perhaps for a while Mitt Romney too. But Bush sort of emerged fairly quickly I think out of there. So Bush winning his primary, Gore winning his, those were big milestones obviously. As always, the debates went a bit differently. Saturday Night Live made mockery of both candidates. Now that I'm thinking about this, social security came up as an issue, and Gore was known for a phrase he called "lock box", promising in a sense to put funds for social security into what he said was a lock box, and not touch them for any other purposes. So there was concern about the long term solvency of Social Security, and that came up. Saturday Night Live made fun of the way Bush said "nuclear" because he pronounced it "nucular". And so I guess even though he wasn't dumb by any means, I think that was sort of the stereotypical knock that Bush

had from people, they didn't think he was smart enough. And the knock against Gore was that he was too boring or too colorless, he wasn't a very exciting candidate. And all along, most of the polls said that it was going to be an extraordinarily close election, so I remember that. And then the obvious milestones were one of the rare times when on election day, it's not clear who wins. Pretty much all the elections I could recall in my lifetime before that, the first one I actually remember was Carter vs. Ford, and I was really young then, but I do remember not knowing until the next morning that Carter had won because it was a very, very close election. After that, elections tended to be over basically by the time the results starting coming in on primetime TV. So certainly by about 9 o'clock at night you would know, and sometimes it would seem earlier than that. When Reagan won re-election in 49 out of 50 states, it was pretty obvious. Even the Bush-Dukakis election was not very close at all on election night. And the Clinton vs George H.W. Bush election was again, certainly over early enough in the evening that you knew what was going to happen, and the Clinton vs. Dole election wasn't much of a contest either. So this particular one, Bush vs. Gore was closer than any I had remembered, and the night of, the election results seemed to change every half hour to an hour or so. There was an early announcement that Gore had won Florida, and I remember thinking at the time, and telling Mom, "Well if Gore has won Florida this is over." In retrospect, obviously it would have been, if that was over. But by the time we got home, we had just purchased a new car, new for us, it was a used car at Saturn, and we are driving it home listening to the election results and they seemed to change a couple of times. I remember I stayed up pretty late and eventually decided to go back to bed because it was very clear that Florida was so close that the count wouldn't be completed. Maybe not even by the next day. And the first hint that you got that something was really strange was going on was that the next morning, there had not been an announcement on a winner yet. And Bush's camp was claiming that it had won Florida by about 537 votes, and that that would award them Florida's electoral votes and the election even though it was quite clear that Gore had won a sizeable number more popular votes nationwide. I remember the numbers were kind of fluid as they were coming in, with absentee ballots and all that. At some points it seemed that Gore had been up by almost a million votes nationwide but it hadn't worked out for him in the electoral college. And then the aftermath was that Florida's vote was so close, I think it was within .0001, I mean 537 votes in a state of millions of people is so statistically close it almost can't be measured. So that triggered an automatic recount, and all kinds of issues arose during the recount. There were kinds of ballots that had been used that people found confusing, there is the butterfly ballot, there were punch ballots, where in some cases the indentation or hole or whatever that would have to be punched out to indicate you had voted for a candidate, didn't come completely detached, so there was all kinds of interesting terminology floating around as the election results came in. "Hanging chads" was one that people remembered. The chad is the little piece that comes out of the ballot when you punch a hole in it, and so a lot of the votes had to be recounted by hand. And I don't remember the pure details of this but one of the recounts that was going on, one of the votes had been certified, or was going to be certified, by Florida's attorney general, and the Democrat's in Florida kept demanding a recount, and if I recall correctly the Florida Supreme Court ordered a recount to go forward, the case when on an emergency basis to the Supreme Court which stopped the recount, and that effectively

handed the election to Bush, with the 500 vote margin in Florida and that was that. But that whole aftermath process took by my recollection the best part of a month. I do remember that it got to the point where both campaigns were wondering like how much transition work do we have to do. It was clear that somebody new was going into the White House, Clinton was leaving, either Bush or Gore was going to go in, and since the inauguration was in January, and you are edging into the month before that, both campaigns were wondering should we put a cabinet together, should we get a transition team, and there were all sorts of logistical problems that came in. So the transition of power from one President to another was kind of heavily abbreviated there because there wasn't nearly as much time because it wasn't clear who had won. And I would argue it still isn't clear who'd won because the full recount of the ballots in Florida was never fully completed, and even if it had been, it was clear that there had been so many problems in the mechanics of the voting, with a margin that small in a state that big, my sense was no one will ever know who ever really won Florida because the vote margin, whatever it was, was well within the margin of error just for trying to count that many votes. So essentially the state of Florida in large measures you could say it was tied, but somebody had to win it and earn those electoral votes and it turned out to be Bush.

Question (C. Mayers): What were the biggest arguments from each camp on why they should be elected into office?

Answer (T. Mayers): Why they should have been? I think I covered some of this already. I mean, for Bush and Cheney argued that the economy was on the way down, and some fairly drastic actions needed to be able to save it from going into recession. Gore was talking about the climate, climate change, global warming. Both sides talked about national security. Ordinarily, after a two term presidency like Bill Clinton had, you'd expect that part of the argument would be, especially if the President had been popular as Clinton was, in spite of a number of troubles he had while in office. You would think that the party, the candidate from the party that had been in the White House would sort of argue for a continuation. Maybe Gore and Clinton never got along particularly well, or didn't during Clinton's second term, and so Clinton in my recollection didn't do a whole lot of campaigning, so one argument that Gore wasn't really making was we've had eight great years of policy, and the country has been doing well, which on a lot of levels it was, economically especially. Gore wasn't really arguing for continuing Clinton's policies. Obviously Bush and Cheney were saying that we needed a big change, and Gore was trying to stake himself out as a Democrat, but as a different type of candidate than Clinton had been.

Question (C. Mayers): Can you explain how the media was portraying this election and what they forecasted as a result?

Answer (T. Mayers): It depends on what you mean by the media. Some people would argue that all media are all biased and they all have agendas, but I think what people call the "main-stream media" I don't really recall them as being, they didn't seem to have any obvious agenda. If anything I remember watching the debates and what not, it seemed that both candidates got a lot of negative coverage. I don't think either one of them came out looking as a particularly favorable or positive candidate. That might have been partly

because of the way they were covered, but also partly because of their own actions. One thing I just remembered, I don't know which question this would be in relation to, but right before the election, as in maybe a couple of days before, there was a late-breaking revelation that George Bush had been some years before that, arrested for drunk driving in Florida, and that piece of news had never come out before. I think there was an argument over who had broken that story. I believe it was someone who was supporting Al Gore but who was not in any way working with the Gore campaign. And actually, the Bush team thought that that was unfair, although Bush never denied it, he admitted immediately that it had happened, although that had not been public before. So I guess you could say that that could have cost Bush some votes, very late before the election, and that might have been one of the reasons why it came out as close as it did on election night. However I've never seen any kind of study of anyone who tried to figure out if that really cost Bush any votes. To me that's an example of fairly negative coverage that I recall both candidates getting. It seemed like it was one of those elections where a lot of people were excited about a candidate, they were more voting against somebody than for somebody.

Question (C. Mayers): Can you describe the mood of the nation leading up to election day?

Answer (T. Mayers): Well because it was so close, and the polls said it was going to be so close, I think the mood was kind of tense. And again, I think it was more that people, rather than people being excited, I'm sure some people were excited about the possibility of their candidate winning, but my recollection is that more people, the people I talked to and some of the coverage, people were more concerned about the candidate they didn't like winning, and what would happen if that came to pass. So again, it was people, a lot of people were voting against a candidate rather than for one. So there was that tense mood. After the election, when it became obvious that the election night vote count wasn't really good enough to tell you who the winner was immediately. Then it got really tense and kind of argumentative because obviously both campaigns wanted to be present in Florida to watch how the vote recount was taking place. When literally every vote counts, it was a very long and painstaking process, and people who were interested in both campaigns wanted to be there. And so it got really tense and people were worried about what kind of effect this would have, whichever way it went because one thing was clear to see, that if the vote is so close that a winner can't be clearly determined within even a week of the election, it would seem to expose a potential weak point in the system. What do you do when it's so close that it's very difficult, if not impossible to figure out who won. And so for almost everyone alive, nothing like that, for an office of that level of importance had never happened before. And so people were, there was anger, there was nervousness, and all kinds of stuff, it was a fairly negative time, even though in retrospect it was interesting because it is one of the things that can happen in the system.

Question (C. Mayers): When did people start realizing the closeness of this race?

Answer (T. Mayers): I think certainly within the month prior to the election it was very clear because there was never a poll in my recollection that showed either candidate with any kind of significant lead. They went back and forth, most of the polls were within the

margin of error, meaning it's not clear. And even within states, Pennsylvania being one of them, it was unclear up until the very last moment who might win. And there were a lot of states that were decided by very narrow margins, obviously Florida is the obvious one, but lost of the other states too, especially what today people call "battleground states", were all really, really close. So at least a month before I think it was fairly obvious to almost anybody that it was going to be extraordinarily close. It's one of the reasons why I didn't personally think much of voting third party because I believe Ralph Nader ran in that election too, some people blame him for costing Gore the election in Florida, but a lot of people were thinking whatever side they were on, not being able to take the risk of voting for somebody like Pat Buchanan or Al Gore because that might throw the election to a candidate I like even less. The phrase "the lesser of two evils" voting, I think there was a lot of that that went on during this election, people thinking that neither Bush nor Gore were the kind of candidates that would excite them but they are better than the alternative so that's who people were voting for. My recollection it was obvious for a long time it was going to be close

Question (C. Mayers): Can you describe the feeling of the country until a final ruling was made on the results?

Answer (T. Mayers): Nervousness. Anger if it didn't go the way you wanted it to. Suspicion of people trying to meddle with or manipulate the process. But, surprisingly at the very end, when the Supreme Court halted Florida's recount, and effectively gave the presidency to Bush, on a very narrow electoral margin, when by then it was crystal clear that he had lost the popular vote. Gore's concession speech, which a lot of people on both sides said was extremely tactful and gracious, I think took a lot of the potential edge off of that whole situation. Yes, people were unhappy if they had voted for Gore and didn't want to see Bush in. What Gore basically said was we have a system, the Supreme Court came to a decision, I may not like it but I accept it, so I concede, and George W. Bush will be the next President. And there was no violence, there were no uprisings, or anything, it just moved into a transition phase, and it had been very tense in the days and weeks after the election, but it was pretty amazing how people accepted what had happened, and thought that's the way the system works. It's not perfect, if it goes to the Supreme Court they have the final say, they had it, and that was that. Didn't mean everyone was happy, a lot of people weren't, but there wasn't any, I suppose it could have been a much worse situation if people had decided to have any kind of uprisings, we don't like the decision so we are going to go march in the streets and demand that it be changed. There was very little of that. There was just an acceptance on how the system works, even if it wasn't perfect, and sort of moving on into the next phase.

Question (C. Mayers): Looking back on the election from today, how has it impacted the country.

Answer (T. Mayers): In more ways than you can count. I mean, I think in the long run, it made the country more polarized than it had been, because it showed what could happen in a very close election. If Gore, in my estimation, handled the difficult decision of conceding really well, and a lot of people on both sides of the political divide thought that he had. Bush governed, or started to govern as though he had one in a landslide. If you

look at the political leanings and shape of his cabinet and all that it was as if he had won on this sort of major mandate to make changes. People of the other side of the spectrum were upset by that, but it was his right to do it that way. No one could have predicted that too long after that, the United States would be hit by a massive terrorist attack, and that the person who had been elected in the narrowest of margins would be the one in charge of dealing with the aftermath of it. I've sometimes wondered if Gore had been President instead of Bush and 9/11 had happened, what would his response have been. There is no way to know without asking him, and he might not even tell you, but I would have to suspect that the US invasion of Afghanistan probably would have happened even if Gore was President, but the Iraq War would not have happened. So everything that flows out of the conflict with Iraq you would have to imagine wouldn't have happened and perhaps the whole shape of the Middle East and the post-9/11 world would have been different had Gore been President at that time.