The unelected professionals who run campaigns compete in a fiercely Darwinian system. Most can expect a career arc and professional longevity similar to the latest Hollywood starlet’s, and even the best are routinely replaced. Ideology and technology change with election cycles, and failure can strike suddenly. It’s a cutthroat calling—and when you’re finished, and everyone else has moved on, you may well harbor lingering regrets about the tactics you’ve used to win races. If you’ve worked in national politics at almost any point in the last forty years, chances are things got worse, not better, on your watch. That can gnaw at you.

It certainly gnawed at three diners gathered in a downtown Washington restaurant on a chilly October evening just before the 2005 elections, as an unlikely scene unfolded. Over dinner, some of the best political minds of the 1970s, Republican and Democratic, reached bipartisan consensus: none could any longer recognize the political parties in which they had once been major players. The cynical focus on divisive “wedge” issues and the ferocious negativity of recent campaigns, which fed in to an inability to govern once elected, dismayed everyone at the table.

Doug Bailey had pioneered modern political consulting, working with his late partner John Deardourff on behalf of Gerald Ford and other Republicans. Joining him were Jerry Rafshoon and Hamilton Jordan, Jimmy Carter’s brain trust in the 1976 election that deposed Ford. Graying now, each successful in a career after politics, the three had assembled to discuss plans to produce a book and a documentary film about television’s impact on the political process—something each had found cause to regret. During the course of a year spent researching their project, even these veterans had been alarmed to discover just how dysfunctional the system had become.

As the evening wore on, a sense of frustration pervaded the gathering, until finally Jordan exclaimed, “Why are you guys just writing a book? Can’t we do something about this? The country is in serious trouble here!” And then came the leap. The three decided on the spot that they would create a third party to represent the center in the 2008 presidential election. To guarantee that it would, they decided that the ticket itself would be bipartisan: one Democrat and one Republican. And if independents with bipartisan tendencies were interested, they’d be welcome, too. They called their new party “Unity08” and resolved that it would operate on the Internet. That way everyone could join the party online and participate as a delegate, helping to build the party’s platform collectively rather than ceding that task to interest groups, as both major parties tend to do. Ultimately, they hoped, these delegates would select a presidential and vice-presidential candidate in an online convention to be held in 2008, just after the major-party primaries determined the Republican and Democratic nominees. This will be a period of maximal importance to Unity08’s founders, who believe that many voters will be dissatisfied with the available choices, and that ambitious candidates—Republicans and Democrats who didn’t quite make it, as well as independents—will seriously consider a third-party alternative.

Bailey had been experimenting for years with the Internet applications of politics, in a series of civic-minded youth projects he’d embarked on after retiring from politics. All of the founders recognized that this new technology was poised to transform politics, just as greatly as television had in their own era. They had seen television’s effect on the political process grow more and more pernicious as the years went by, poisoning the dialogue while forcing candidates to raise ever-greater sums of money to pay for it. They recognized that the Internet, in its political infancy, was a force that could still be shaped
for good.

The three parted ways that evening scarcely believing what they’d decided to do. But in the months ahead, as they studied the feasibility of their plan, they became convinced it could work. Being political consultants, they commissioned a national poll to examine the mood of the electorate and gauge its willingness to accept an independent party. The nation appeared willing indeed: 82 percent of respondents agreed that the country was too polarized to make progress solving problems, and three-quarters wanted more choices than just the Democratic and Republican candidates. The three persuaded Roger Craver, a pioneer in the field of cause-oriented fund-raising, to join them with the object of financing the effort through online donations, and they recruited an executive committee to raise a $1 million bridge fund. They also hired the prominent Washington law firm of Steptoe and Johnson to advise them on ballot access in all fifty states. To establish the appearance of sober competence, they enlisted the actor Sam Waterston, a friend of Rafshoon’s best known for his role as a principled district attorney on the television show Law & Order, to appear in Internet promotions. “I’m one of those people who have been watching politics from the outside with a typical mix of horror and fascination,” Waterston told me recently. “The idea is so simple, yet if it works, it’s one of those things that will change the direction of the river.”

The timing seemed auspicious, less because of the originators’ own career stages than because of the current evolutionary stage of the Internet itself. “During the 2004 election,” George Vradenburg, a former general counsel for America Online who is advising Unity08, told me, “people’s perception of the Internet started shifting dramatically, from the idea that it is an information source to the idea that it is an empowerment tool through which they can impact politics. The Internet has democratized American society in a number of ways. But it has not yet democratized our democracy.”

Vradenburg explains that the Internet is a “disruptive technology,” meaning one that upsets an existing system in the way that cars replaced horses and digital images are replacing film. Vradenburg and other theorists argue that in the case of the Internet, the disruption occurs in two distinct phases. In the first, the technology mimics a function that already exists, only faster and better (accountants can work from home). In the next, it transforms that function outright (accounting moves to India). He suggested how this might apply to politics: “Howard Dean showed that the Internet can be a great tool for fund-raising and organizing—existing functions performed in a political campaign. The next step is rethinking entirely how you go about the whole functionality you’re talking about. That’s what’s happening here: How do you transform the entire nominating process?”

The creators of Unity08 believe that the answer is to open the process to the Internet masses, causing a tectonic shift powerful enough to disrupt the two-party system. They have not, however, lost faith in that system—merely in its power to correct itself. “The two-party system has worked well for 200 years and can continue to do so,” Bailey says, “but only when elections are fought over the middle. Our goal is to jolt the two parties into recognizing this, by drawing them into a fight over the middle rather than allowing them to keep maximizing the appeal to their bases at the extremes.”

Bailey and his confederates envision their enterprise not as the establishment of a permanent third party but as a one-shot affair—a dose of medicine strong enough to bring the two parties to their senses. Only then, they believe, can things truly improve. In other words, they are attempting nothing less than to rescue American politics and put the country back on the right track.

Of course, Unity08’s formal launch this month also promises its founders the rare shot at a second act on the national political stage and a chance, all these years later, to atone for the past. “They were the first political consultants to grasp the power of the tube to both convince and convert,” says Dick Wirthlin, a contemporary who was Ronald Reagan’s pollster and chief strategist. “But I would attribute at least part of the tremendous cynicism we’re experiencing today to the way politicians and campaigns exploit the dark side of television.” The Unity08 principals seem to feel this way, too, which may explain their eagerness to once again harness a powerful new technology to political ends—this time with the wisdom of experience.

“We didn’t recognize it at the time,” Bailey told me, “but television just ran over us all: it changed our culture, our habits, our mores, our politics—it changed everything. None of us ever asked how we could use this wondrous new technology to improve our democracy. Well, we have another new technology that is going to change everything. If you recognize that right now our politics is as empty as at any point in my adult lifetime, and the issues are as serious as at any point in my adult lifetime, what choice do you have but to try to do something about it?”

One of the many things that differentiate Unity08 from earlier third-party movements is that its founders aren’t putting forward their own candidate. What they have in mind might instead be thought of as the “Field of Dreams” model: build a mechanism whereby qualified individuals of insufficient partisanship to win the Republican or Democratic nomination gain a legitimate shot at the White House, and trust that the best candidates will come. The beauty of the whole thing, Rafshoon explained one day over lunch in a Georgetown restaurant, is that it
completely upends the way Americans currently choose their presidential nominees. “The 2004 presidential election cost $2.2 billion, and the parties left choosing their candidates to a handful of voters in Iowa and New Hampshire!” he exclaimed. “If we do it over the Net and succeed—we think it’ll cost less than $10 million to set up—then we’ll have proved that you don’t need $2.2 billion to win the presidency, and we’ll have thrown open the process to an online army of millions.” As soon as frustrated citizens have that kind of power, the possibilities for electoral upheaval are practically limitless. “It’s the perfect vehicle for voters to start a draft movement,” Rafshoon said.

During our lunch, Rafshoon spotted Bob Shrum, the manager of John Kerry’s failed presidential campaign, peacocking across the room in an expensive suit and a fine silk tie. Shrum has grown rich through politics—his firm is believed to have pocketed $5 million from the Kerry campaign alone—even though he’s lost every presidential race he’s been associated with. Rafshoon, by contrast, wore a bright-red sweater and flashed a sly grin as he laid out his plans, resembling nothing so much as a mischievous grandpa about to pull off some bit of deviltry with his cronies at the expense of swells like Shrum (whose job Rafshoon performed for Carter, it bears noting, successfully and for a lot less money). There is something touching about the civic-minded impulse behind Unity08—about its founders’ faith, even after a lifetime in politics, that given the means, a kind of ordinary human decency will prevail over the cynical forces that are inflicting such damage on the polity.

There’s something touching, as well, about the spectacle of a flock of wise old owls coming out of retirement for one last shot at greatness. It sounds like a Hollywood movie—and was one, if you substitute astronauts for political consultants. Several years ago, Clint Eastwood, Tommy Lee Jones, and Donald Sutherland starred in Space Cowboys, whose unlikely plot bears a healthy resemblance to the story of Unity08. The movie concerns a group of hotshot young test pilots in the 1950s—the Air Force’s top guns—who are poised to become the first astronauts, until their brash break-all-the-rules attitude gets them replaced (by a monkey). Flash forward forty years, and the buddies are in dissatisfied retirement when fate comes knocking. The monkeys running NASA have bolluxed things royally, and a rogue satellite strapped with nukes threatens life on Earth. The astronauts alone possess the wisdom to save it. So, aging and ornery but giddy at having one more chance, they blast off into space.

What has propelled the principals of Unity08 to a launch this month is not fate so much as lifetimes spent innovating for their vision of the greater good. Evident throughout this grand experiment are the career threads of its primary participants and the aspirations that brought them together. After Jimmy Carter lost, Hamilton Jordan returned to his native Georgia, where he became a business consultant (specializing in start-up companies) and a noted author. In his memoir of battling cancer, No Such Thing as a Bad Day, he attributes his survival through three bouts with cancer to his own aggressive intervention, undertaken when he lost faith in his doctors’ approach. Jordan displayed an early tendency toward the third-party solution when he co-managed Ross Perot’s presidential campaign in 1992. Jerry Rafshoon, though he has remained in Washington, left politics with Jimmy Carter to become a Hollywood producer, making documentaries and movies for television; his 1995 film Joseph, starring Ben Kingsley, won him the Emmy for best miniseries.

Roger Craver is reputed to have raised more than $6 billion in small-dollar donations during a career in which he helped start or build many grassroots organizations, including Common Cause, Handgun Control, Inc., the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, and the National Organization for Women. He is famous among his friends for periodically selling his fund-raising firm to his employees and retiring to Martha’s Vineyard, only to be lured back into ownership and activism by the latest cause.

Doug Bailey enjoyed an uncommonly long career as a consultant to moderate Republicans, even as the species grew endangered in the 1980s. He quit in 1987 to co-found, with Craver, The Hotline, a political tip sheet zapped to subscribers each morning through the then-innovative technology of the fax, and later over the Internet. (It is now owned by Atlantic Media.) A classic early adopter, Bailey was among the first to marry politics and the Web. In 1999, again with Craver, he founded the Freedom Channel, the first attempt to provide online video-on-demand campaigning by offering candidates for the House, Senate, and presidency the opportunity to post clips of themselves speaking directly to the camera about a list of issues the channel provided—an early experiment in dictating the agenda. Through various youth programs, Bailey also experimented with online elections. In 2000, he held a Web-based presidential vote for 1.3 million high-school students, at the time the largest online vote ever taken. He followed that with an effort designed to involve students from 2,500 high schools in the political process by getting them each to obtain voting pledges from ten adults. Several of the students, now in college, have joined one of Unity08’s roughly 200 campus affiliates (listed at collegeunity08.com), which are expected to double in number by next year.

If things go according to plan, the next two years will unfold something like this: When Unity08 formally launches its Web site this month, it will begin signing up delegates online. Any registered voter can be a delegate, and can join without
having to give up a prior political affiliation. At the same time, the new party’s leaders will begin the process of qualifying Unity08 on all fifty ballots for the 2008 presidential election. The requirements for ballot access vary dramatically from state to state, so delegates and other volunteers will perform the work of gathering the necessary signatures. The party hopes to qualify for twenty-five ballots by June.

Intermediate goals like this one are crucial to the movement, because its success will depend on building and sustaining momentum—much as Howard Dean’s momentum in the last presidential primary carried him from dark horse to Democratic front-runner in a matter of months. The hope is that the online participatory element will turn Unity08 into a cultural phenomenon. “Younger people, especially, gravitate toward technology, and if it’s married to political reform, so much the better,” Craver says. “At the risk of drawing too close a comparison to American Idol, it’s a voting process that will take place technologically, rather than in some smoke-filled back room.”

Bailey is drawing on his experience teaching young activists to organize online, and he hopes to set off a viral effect through a “One-a-Week Club,” whose members will commit to signing up one new member a week for six months. (Nobody expects this to happen, but if every pledge were to be fulfilled, one delegate would become 34 million delegates in those six months.)

By the time of their convention, a year and a half from now, the founders hope, the party will have signed up as many as 10 million delegates and will be well on its way to qualifying for all fifty ballots, making Unity08 a formally viable path to the presidency. Candidates could gauge their support, and lobby for more, by making traditional appeals and by participating online. As was the case with the Freedom Channel, an important intention of the new party will be to wrest control of the agenda from the candidates and turn it over to the delegates, who will collectively hash out an “American Agenda”—a party platform that Bailey says will be a list not of answers but of questions. This agenda-building process, like all of the party’s activities, will be refereed by an internal rules committee. “If we do it right,” he says, “these questions will get addressed to candidates on the Unity08 Web site, and the candidates will post a video answer.” Bailey is betting that the media will seize on these same questions and put them to all candidates—theby injecting the American Agenda into the national debate.

Unity08’s online convention will be the first party convention since 1952 to feature runoff balloting for a presidential candidate. The rules committee is still nailing down specifics, but the working plan calls for interested candidates—including those who have been the subject of a draft—to declare themselves at the outset of the convention. Once the balloting has winnowed the field to four, each of the remaining candidates will have to choose a running mate from the opposite party: Democrats must choose Republicans they can work with, and vice versa. Independents can choose someone from either party, but in the spirit of unity, they must also name a senior Cabinet officer from the remaining major party—for instance, a Democratic running mate and a Republican secretary of state. Whoever is slated on the official Unity ticket will take on the Democratic and Republican tickets in November. “We’re not in this to play around,” Bailey vows. “We intend to elect the first truly bipartisan presidential ticket in American history.”

For plenty of reasons, this idea might not work. It’s never been tried before, for one thing, and the history of third-party candidates is not encouraging. The whole thing may fail to gather speed, and its founders acknowledge that without momentum it won’t work. “Third parties are like organ transplants—they’re not tolerated well and are often rejected,” says Lance Tarrance, a veteran Republican consultant working for John McCain. “These are good people, but they have been relegated to the sidelines by the new American politics, which is more ideological, more partisan, and certainly has created a new generation of operatives. I can only assume that they’re trying to influence the system rather than take it over.”

Even if the Unity ticket doesn’t win, its creators insist, the mere fact of its presence could force the other parties to return to the vast, forgotten middle or risk losing the next election. The Rovian strategy of division might disappear. Or it might not: partisan strategists might instead decide simply to cede the middle and ratchet up partisanship to excite their bases, on the assumption that with Unity08 on the ballot, they’ll need only a little more than one-third of the vote. “Once you put the tool out there, it’s going to take twists and turns that nobody can predict,” Vradenburg admits. “That’s some of what the excitement is about.”

But it’s also possible to envision scenarios—quite a few, in fact—in which the Unity ticket might work, or might at least become a significant force in the 2008 campaign. If the parties can’t work together on Iraq by then, despite the new Democratic Congress, voters might see Unity’s fusion ticket as a way to make them. Centrists in both parties, from Joe Lieberman to Chuck Hagel, are known to harbor presidential ambitions that have little chance of being fulfilled along current paths. If Michael Bloomberg really is considering a self-financed run as an independent, he couldn’t possible prevail in a four-way race against the Democratic, Republican, and Unity contenders—and he’s already been a Democrat and a Republican, so why not pursue the Unity nomination? If John McCain loses the Republican nomination, he’ll be too old to try again in four or eight years and would loathe waiting around—why not take a final shot at the White House? If Barack
Obama concludes that his time is now and yet can’t stop the Hillary juggernaut, might he cash in his chips before his popularity wanes? And isn’t Jack Welch looking for something to do? Or—heaven forbid—Donald Trump?

It will be a while longer before anyone knows whether Unity08 can live up to its founders’ ambitious hopes. But here’s how the Hollywood version ends: the aging astronauts become overnight media sensations, and on their final mission, against very long odds, they save the world from certain doom.

The URL for this page is http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200701/green-unity08.
Surprise party — Une surprise partie ou une fête surprise[1] (au Québec) est une soirée dansante organisée, soit sans invitations chez un ami qui n'est pas prévenu, en apportant la musique et les boissons, soit en l'honneur de quelqu'un qui n'est pas prévenu. Wikipédia en Français.