

The 1988 campaign was the first in which CBS regularly included references to “political observers” or “campaign experts” when discussing the state of campaign affairs on a given day. This may have been in response to campaign managers’ tight control of messages, but it resulted in heavy reliance on quotes from unnamed people in the know—presumably Washington insiders, reflecting what they’d heard from other Washington insiders. This became so prevalent in 1988 that it was noted by a number of political columnists and commentators. This was initially identified in the 1988 primaries by *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter as the “BTE Factor,” with “BTE” standing for “Better Than Expected.” “The role of the media,” Alter said, “is greatest after the voting begins, when the totals are measured against expectations. Thus Eugene McCarthy in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972 ‘won’ the New Hampshire primary without actually having done so. They simply did BTE (Better Than Expected).”¹⁹ In the general election campaign, the only voting every week was in public opinion polls, so many reporters reflexively used their results—and the comments of Washington insiders—to turn their coverage into a day-to-day series of contests, with the stakes seemingly as high as those in the primaries. At some point this amalgam of observations by reporters and observers was dubbed the “conventional wisdom” of a given time. Jonathan Alter and Mickey Kaus of *Newsweek* attempted to define this term in the October 31, 1988 issue, near the end of the campaign:

For all their mistakes, the Dukakis forces do seem to comprehend that their candidate’s fate is tied inextricably to the perverse twists of something called the conventional wisdom . . . (which) is part of the process. For years there has been an informal but discernible universe of reporters, consultants and commentators who reach the same predictable conclusions about the same political events at roughly the same time. After a few days, of course, these political creatures often change direction (and analysis) completely, en masse and without apology, like a school of fish.²⁰

A candidate’s day-to-day ability to live up to the expectations of the conventional wisdom by garnering better poll numbers, producing controversial advertisements, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds, managing staged events well, or effectively confronting the opponent, became the standard for judging his campaign daily. In fact, *Newsweek* became so enamored of this concept that it created the “Conventional Wisdom Watch,” a weekly feature that showed arrows pointing up, down or sideways depending upon a candidate’s perceived current fortunes. (The feature became one of the most popular items in the magazine, and continued to appear every week for years after the 1988 election was over.)

In this environment, CBS's coverage was perhaps no worse than other outlets, but given CBS's long-standing reputation for high-quality journalism at the time, it's somewhat surprising. If anything, CBS used unnamed observers less than many organizations, choosing instead to interview Washington insiders and other experts on camera. (In August, CBS's Susan Spencer even interviewed well-known communications professor Kathleen Hall Jamieson about Bush's perceived image problems.)²¹

CBS's clearest examples in 1988 of reporters and on-camera pundits setting expectations came in stories about debates and other campaign events throughout the election season. A representative example of this is from the September 18, 1988 CBS Evening News, in which Republican political consultant John Buckley and Democratic consultant Chris Matthews were brought in to discuss the campaign and the upcoming presidential debate with anchor Susan Spencer:

SPENCER: Well, amazing though it seems, there are but 51 days left until the presidential election, and only a week until the debate that could help lots of undecided voters decide. CBS political consultants Chris Matthews and John Buckley are with us again to help sort things out a bit. Gentlemen, let me ask you both, first of all, how do you evaluate the two campaigns as they approach what really could be a make-or-break event?

BUCKLEY: Well, George Bush right now is clearly in the lead. He's going into what is the most important event of the general election next week. Right now, things are somewhat static, but what will be the catalyst to get voters' attention moving again will be that debate next week, and that's why it is critical for both candidates.

SPENCER: Chris?

MATTHEWS: I agree with everything John said. I think it's going to be a make-or-break Sunday next week at this time for Michael Dukakis. I think it's a chance for him to show the American people who Michael Dukakis is.

SPENCER: So what is the best tactic, then, that each can take?

BUCKLEY: Well, Michael Dukakis has to be likable. He's lost the congeniality award to George Bush so far. It's not enough for him to win the debate—and all the expectations are that he will win the debate, because he's a better debater than George Bush—but he has to do it in a likable fashion, and this is one play to take out of Walter Mondale's playbook from 1984. Mondale went into the debate against Reagan—he won the debate, but he also did it in a low-key, respectful, pleasant fashion, and he walked out of there with the respect of the country and with a boost in the polls.

SPENCER: So we're gonna be talking personalities here then, not issues, when it comes right down to it.

MATTHEWS: Well, I think that's the case. In fact, I think that George Bush began to win this campaign at the Republican Convention in New Orleans when he made this wonderful admission of his own ineloquence, his awkwardness at times. I think he should do that again next Sunday night. I also think he needs to talk about the future. I think the more any candidate talks about the future, the more they're gonna grab the attention of the TV viewer.

BUCKLEY: And, Susan, the most important thing for George Bush, really, is to not make a mistake. His debate team, with Jim Baker being the negotiator, did a wonderful job of getting everything they wanted out of the Dukakis campaign, except one. Dukakis can, if George Bush makes a mistake, use that in a 30-second commercial, which you'll see over and over again, so it's critical for Bush not to make a mistake that Dukakis could capitalize on.

SPENCER: Do the two of you agree that both are gonna be so worried about making a mistake that this could turn out not to be a very exciting event?

BUCKLEY: It could be like the Super Bowl.

MATTHEWS: All right. Well, I think it's very important that Michael Dukakis not swing for the fence—he should try to hit a single. I think the best thing for Dukakis, following up on what John just said, was that he showed that he's a smart person, that he's a likable person and that he thinks about the future. I think he should use his ambition as a plus for the country, rather than for him personally. I think people want an ambitious man as President, as long as that ambition is in the interest of the future of the country.

BUCKLEY: And, Susan, we've had two separate auditions. The Republican Convention was an audition for George Bush to be President of the United States, and the Democratic Convention was that for Michael Dukakis. This is the first time that both of these candidates will, side by side, essentially be auditioning for the American people to decide who they want to have having dinner with them every single night for four years, when they watch their nightly news.

SPENCER: And then one last –

MATTHEWS: And it will also be about where they're going to have dinner the next four years, I think. I think we have to get back to the economic issues of this campaign, and the candidate who does that effectively will seem like the person who's talking about the beef of the campaign.

SPENCER: One last, very unfair, question: how are you handicapping this? Chris?

MATTHEWS: I think Dukakis will win on points. People will say he was sharp and smart. He will be the knife cutting through butter, but the questions remain, as John pointed out, will people like the knife as much as they do the butter?

SPENCER: John?

BUCKLEY: And I think that the expectations for Bush are so low that, if he does anything other than drool on his tie, he'll be the winner. (LAUGHTER)

SPENCER: And, in a week, we'll know. Okay. Thank you very much.