"Above the Fray" Filmmaker Discusses Lessons of the '88 Dukakis Campaign

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MSNBC's Will Rabbe discusses his NBC Learn original documentary "Above the Fray" which tells the story of the 1988 presidential election through the eyes of the Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis. To view the full documentary, click the "Links" section of this CueCard.

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APA

CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

Transcript
Above the Fray Filmmaker Discusses Lessons of the 88 Dukakis Campaign
ANNOUNCER: This is Press Pass, your all-access pass to an extra Meet the Press conversation.
CHUCK TODD, anchor:
This week on Press Pass, how the 1988 presidential election rewrote the ground rules of modern politics, revealing the stories behind the strategic missteps in Democratic party nominee Michael Dukakis’ campaign. It’s all in the new documentary for NBC Learn called “Above the Fray: The Lessons of Dukakis ’88” by MSNBC’s Hardball Producer Will Rabbe who joins me now. Will, welcome to Press Pass.
WILL RABBE (Producer, MSNBC’s Hardball): Thanks for having me.
TODD: So you have-- I’ve known you a long time. You’ve been obsessed with this moment that--
RABBE: Sure.
TODD: --that it was sort of a-- you know, there’s different moments that sort of change the trajectory of how we fight political campaigns. The moment you were trying to capture here is what?
RABBE: Well, I think the idea is that in 1988, George Bush and Michael Dukakis, neither of them was especially compelling as a candidate.
TODD: Charismatically so.
RABBE: Exactly.
TODD: It’s true.
RABBE: And early on, the Bush team decided that rather than raise their positive, their approval, they had to attack Dukakis to raise his negatives, make him-- just disqualify him as a candidate. And what happened was you saw this election where you had one side using negative attacks and trying to undercut their opponent, and the other guy trying to run what he called the positive campaign, where he-- he did not
respond to the charges that were leveled at him. And of course, as we know, they stuck. It was an election
where you have one guy-- I think, the best-- someone said at the time the American voting public, they
like someone who fights dirty over someone who doesn’t fight back at all.
TODD: And that’s the-- you know, going through this and you have this nice, interesting, long sit down
with Michael Dukakis today--
RABBE: Right.
TODD: --Looking back at Michael Dukakis, circa 1988. And it was competency, right? That was his
whole-- you know, I’m going to be--
RABBE: Right.
TODD: --a steady manager and a steady hand. And, you know, in many ways, this was a Roger Ailes-
designed campaign and Lee Atwater sort of going, you know, look. They knew it was tough to run for a
third term, for a third Republican term in a row. It’s just something that doesn’t happen for either party.
So they had to do something drastic, especially since Dukakis looked like he was going to win.
RABBE: He was running seventeen points ahead at the time of the convention.
TODD: So what-- what does he say went wrong? He doesn’t blame Bush anymore, does he? He’s started-
- he’s now actually blaming himself.
RABBE: Right. And-- and his ability to reflect and sort of analyze what must have been a very difficult
election is-- I think, you don’t see that in most losing presidential candidates. Usually, they come up with
some rationale that makes them feel better about why they lost. It wasn’t necessarily their fault. What
Michael Dukakis does is he takes the onus and responsibility, he owns it. And he says it was my fault,
what we didn’t-- we did not counter the charges that were being leveled at us. I did not respond. In fact, he
says I wasn’t really paying attention to the Bush campaign. And on the one hand, you know, it’s
admirable that he wanted to run what he called the positive campaign.
TODD: Sure.
RABBE: But there’s no such thing as a one-size-fits-all--
TODD: That’s right.
RABBE: --presidential campaign. You need to tailor it to the guy you’re running against.
TODD: Right.
RABBE: And that’s what Bush did to him. But that’s not what he did back. And therefore, you saw him
go from a seven-point-- you know, lead in late July, to losing by eight points. That’s a twenty-five percent
swing…
TODD: That’s unbelievable.
RABBE: …in just three months.
TODD: You know, it was interesting-- you know, just watching again. The attacks-- you say-- he says he
didn’t pay attention to them. But boy, did they-- he take him in personally, the attack of the medical
rumors about him.
RABBE: Okay, right, right.
TODD: He was obsessed with this.
RABBE: Okay.
TODD: That clearly impacted him. And he wanted to do the power walk. And I vividly actually remember the power walk--
RABBE: Right.
TODD: --and thought--
RABBE: And I’m not sure--
TODD: --it felt eye-rollish. It was not the thing--
RABBE: I don’t think that many people remember what actually happened. But-- and remember, this was ’88 so--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --Tom Eagelton, who was dropped from the 1972 ticket--
TODD: Still sixteen years, not a long-- not that far.
RABBE: He was still in people’s minds. And he had been dropped from McGovern’s ticket because he had had electroshock therapy, had psychological issues and whatnot. So what happened-- I’m sure many don’t remember this-- is that there were rumors actually spread by the Lyndon LaRouche campaign. And somehow, at a Ronald Reagan press conference, someone asked the president what he made of these rumors.
TODD: Right.
RABBE: And instead of dismiss them or, you know, what have you, not get involved--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --Reagan says, I wouldn’t pick on an invalid.
TODD: Right.
RABBE: So in effect, you’ve got the most powerful, you know, leader in politics in this country--
TODD: And Michael Dukakis, by the way, is convinced that Reagan was in on a-- like was did it on purpose.
RABBE: Well-- and obviously, there’s-- we’re never going to know--
TODD: Right.
RABBE: --if that’s-- if that’s true. If it was, maybe it was very savvy of the Republican campaign. But in this case, it lent credibility to what was a unsubstantiated rumor, right? So when Dukakis was asked about it, he had-- he had an opening. He had to-- you know, he could have punched back. He could have attacked Reagan from a defensive position. And I think most people would have rooted for him if he had done that--
TODD: Right.
RABBE: --especially because there was no merit to the charge that was being leveled at him. And instead, he said I don’t blame President Reagan.
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: He made a mistake. He misspoke.
TODD: He blamed the press.
RABBE: And-- well, eventually, what he did was he-- he-- because he was-- as he says in the film--
TODD: Right.
RABBE: --he lost eight or ten points within a week.
TODD: Right.
RABBE: He challenged the press to what he called a rigorous three-mile power walk. And he would do
this thing where-- and you know, it’s 1988, I guess, you pull your socks up to your knees.
TODD: Yeah, short-shorts.
RABBE: You know, you got the short-shorts and--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --you know, these-- what he called the heavy hand weights, right?
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: And so he’s in Denver, Colorado. And to push back at this idea that he’s physically and mentally weak--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --he does a power walk. Now, I don’t know if that was, you know, enough to put that to bed. But
the press certainly stopped asking him about it.
TODD: All right. We’ll be back more from Will Rabbe in this interesting documentary in just a moment.
Back now with more from Will Rabbe on his new documentary for NBC Learn called Above the Fray:
The Lessons of Dukakis ’88. Of course, the whole issue of Dukakis not fighting back, not being a fighter
against attacks, even unfair attacks, crystalized the debate, the infamous Bernard Shaw question--
RABBE: Sure.
TODD: --from CNN about “If Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you support the death
penalty?” And it had nothing to do with-- the reaction had nothing to do with death penalty. And instead,
it was his personal reaction that he just didn’t know how to show emotion.
RABBE: Right. And-- and leading up to that second debate, there was-- what had happened, the first
debate went well for Dukakis. He more or less landed a few punches on Bush. He-- you know, was-- was
ticking up, but not enough to come back. So there was a lot of pressure on him for the-- for the second
debate. Now when I spoke to him about it, and when I spoke to his former-- the guy who prepped him--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --it was actually Tom Donilon.
TODD: Oh.
RABBE: He--
TODD: Tom Donilon, former national security adviser to the president of the United States--
RABBE: That’s right.
TODD: --and a big political operative in the ’80s.
RABBE: Prepped every--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --president Democratic nominee for these debates, for years. He had a-- he had gone on The
TODAY Show. And it was in the air that he needed to show some sort of emotional connection. And one
of the things in the film that we-- we found was that he had gone on to the TODAY Show and said, I’m
very passionate about a lot of things, including my family.
TODD: Right.
RABBE: And so it was sort of ironic that when the first question out the gate-- remember, this was-- this was, you know-- “welcome to the debate, first question Mike Dukakis--
TODD: Yes.
RABBE: --if Kitty Dukakis was”-- was the first thing.
TODD: Right.
RABBE: So, you know-- usually you’d expect that a moderator would sort of save that-- you know, save the best for the last or whatnot. And of course, the other moderators including Andrea Mitchell had asked him not to ask that question.
TODD: Yeah. It was a-- it was a controversial question.
RABBE: And he-- as he says in the film, he answered it like he had always answered that question a thousand times before.
TODD: Answering the death penalty question.
RABBE: Exactly.
TODD: Not the--
RABBE: He did not address what everyone wanted him to-- to-- to do or address, is make that emotional connection. He had the opportunity and he missed it.
TODD: Let’s contrast it for instance to Newt Gingrich, right?
RABBE: Right.
TODD: John King opens a debate--
RABBE: That’s right.
TODD: --about his personal life, about accusations.
RABBE: And he-- he lashed out and he shamed the press.
TODD: Shamed the press. If a Mike Dukakis shames Bernard Shaw in that moment--
RABBE: If he had taken that opportunity, it probably would have done exactly what it was that he was trying to do at that time--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --which was, show that he is a passionate person about many things including his family, showing some emotion as well.
TODD: You know, the-- you know, it was a great Walter Mondale anecdote that he loved to tell about saying-- he called up George McGovern and asked him, when do you get over losing the presidency? And McGovern quipped to him, I’ll let you know when you do. Michael Dukakis, has he gotten over it yet?
RABBE: Well, I think at the very least, right after the election, he was able to-- rather than wallow in his, you know--
TODD: He went back to a day job.
RABBE: He did.
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: And he was still governor.
TODD: That’s right.
RABBE: But he also-- in his concession speech, he talked about how-- you know, imagine you’re talking to the most hardcore supporters you’ve had. And they’re disappointed, obviously, and-- in the last scene in the film, you hear him say that-- this is after being walloped-- he says, politics is a noble profession. I don’t want you to be discouraged, I want you to be encouraged. So from the get-go, I think he was able to sort of put the-- you know, the-- the hard feelings aside and sort of think of it in a more-- and this is very Michael Dukakis-- think of it in an analytical sense.

TODD: Yeah.

RABBE: However, you know, he would say that if he had a nickel for every person who came up to him in the supermarket who said, you’re nothing like the way you’re portrayed in 1988--

TODD: Right.

RABBE: --he said he’d be a rich man. So, you know, he-- I think-- it hurt, but more-- unlike other candidates, he’s able to address why he lost.

TODD: And yet, there’s going to be some Democrats who don’t have sympathy for Dukakis for the--

RABBE: Oh, sure, a lot.

TODD: --for one reason. Including a guy named Joe Biden. Because in the primary, Michael Dukakis’ campaign showed that--

RABBE: Right.

TODD: --they were willing to play dirty. They were willing to play lowball. It was the Dukakis campaign that created the infamous tape that alleged that Joe Biden was plagiarizing a speech of Neil Kinnock when--

RABBE: Right.

TODD: --it was a little bit of-- it was like the one time he didn’t-- you know, it was--

RABBE: Right. That’s what he said, because--

TODD: --it was below the belt. It was below the belt.

RABBE: Okay. Well, here’s what-- here’s what came across to individuals watching it. Kinnock’s speech, which had to do with his upbringing--

TODD: Yeah, right.

RABBE: --his family ancestry even-- Joe Biden, when you see the tape of it, it sounds like--

TODD: It’s awful. You don’t know.

RABBE: --Joe Biden appropriates Kinnock’s life story.

TODD: Right.

RABBE: And-- and ultimately, you know, maybe it’s a big coincidence.

TODD: That’s right.

RABBE: The Kinnocks family, you know, did X and Biden’s family also did X. But--

TODD: But it was the Dukakis campaign that did it. Does he have regrets on that?

RABBE: That’s right. Well, what he says in the film, and what, you know, may have surprised you when you saw it, is that, you know, he-- he says so what? And he ultimately says that he made a mistake in letting go the campaign manager who released that tape. This was a big dust up.

TODD: John Sasso was the manager.
RABBE: John Sasso was the-- his guy Friday for--
TODD: Yeah.
RABBE: --for-- he was the right hand man.
TODD: Sure.
RABBE: And for many, he was the person that translated Mike Dukakis into someone that voters would actually like. And that was probably a very big loss. Because for-- for Dukakis, who ran a great primary campaign after that, he didn’t pivot into general election mode. And there’s some debate as to whether Sasso had been there, would he have done a better job of turning the campaign to George Bush and running a better general election campaign.
TODD: Well, it’s a fascinating documentary. We’ve had closer presidential elections. But that is still one of the-- when you think about it, through the totality of ’88, one of the great upsets, that Dukakis didn’t win. Well, Rabbe, it’s very interesting--
RABBE: Thank you.
TODD: --and more watchable than maybe people might realize.
RABBE: Exactly.
TODD: It’s a very watchable documentary.
That’s all for our conversation today. But you can find this and past episodes on our website, meetthepressnbc.com. We’ll be back next week. But right now, stay tuned for President Obama’s weekly address, right after this.