

“Fuzzy Math”
by Matthew S. Schwartz

2001

Matthew S. Schwartz

“Mister vice-president,” said the man in the chair. “You have questioned whether your opponent has the experience to be president of the United States.” He leaned forward ever so slightly, just enough to convey the importance of the question. “What exactly do you mean?”

The house was quiet, the audience expectant. What the tall man standing behind the podium said here tonight could conceivably affect billions around the world. But the man wasn’t nervous. He couldn’t be nervous. Not tonight, not ever. He opened his mouth to speak.

“This is a *very* important moment for our country,” he drawled. “We have achieved *extraordinary* prosperity. And in *this* election, America has to make an *important* choice: Will we use our prosperity to enrich not just the *few*, but *all* of our families?”

Donna Brazile stood in the wings, nodding with satisfaction. She had *been* the man in the chair, asking questions that ranged from the definite to the definitely not. This was a definite, and Gore was solid as usual. He continued as they had practiced, posing rhetorical questions, answering them with a quick rundown of intended policy, and making sure the moderator didn’t try to cut him off in mid-sentence.

From behind her, Brazile heard the all-too-common sound of flesh against metal. She turned around to see Mackenzie banging his hand against the side of the 19-inch monitor, pummeling his laptop keyboard at high-speed, and continuing to bang the monitor.

“Hey! Keep it down,” said Brazile. “There’s a debate going on, you know.”

“I had no idea,” said Mackenzie, uninterested. His eyes were focused on the monitor, and he leaned in, peering deep into the screen.

“Tell me what you’re working on,” said Brazile. “Maybe I can help.”

Mackenzie let out a short laugh, an unintelligible, high-pitched syllable that Brazile perceived as a combination of surprise and arrogance. She was right on both counts.

“Why do you never tell me what you’re working on? You set up at every rally, every interview, every debate, and you *always* have some kind of trouble, and yet you won’t even tell me what your problem is. Maybe I can help!” Brazile walked to Mackenzie and placed her hand on his shoulder. “But how can I help if you don’t trust me?”

“Don’t be silly, Donna, of course I trust you,” Mackenzie said, quickly turning off his monitor. “If I could tell you, I would. But you know my orders are from higher up.” He gestured to the television monitor set up in front of them. The sound was off, but they could hear Gore’s words coming from the loudspeakers in the auditorium. He was talking about his lockbox.

Brazile grinned. “You hear that? That was my idea.”

“What, keeping Social Security separate from the money used for tax refunds?”

“The lockbox metaphor, smart ass. That was my idea. Al wanted to call it a ‘tape backup system.’”

“Fuzzy Math”

For the first time, Mackenzie looked directly at Brazile. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“I wish I were,” said Brazile. “In the first version of his speech, he wanted to keep Social Security and Medicare in an encrypted tape backup system, with... let me see if I can remember... hourly high-speed uploads to a secure data storage facility under the Pentagon? I think that’s it. Anyway, I told him to change it to ‘lockbox.’”

Mackenzie shook his head. “Well... it’s a good thing you caught it.”

“That’s my job,” said Brazile. “Any good campaign manager would have done the same thing.” She paused, recalling the original conversation. “It’s funny, though. When I told him that the metaphor would go over some peoples’ heads, he gave me this weird look and said, ‘*Metaphor?*’”

Mackenzie chuckled. It sounded forced. “You’ve been working with him for how many years, and you can’t even appreciate his sense of humor yet?”

“One. And understand it, yes. Appreciating it is a different beast all together.”

The computer beeped. Mackenzie turned the monitor back on, and adjusted some on-screen control panels. Brazile quickly glanced at the screen, trying to make out whatever she could before she was shooed away. The screen was rapidly filling with words, and switching between different databases and online encyclopedias. She saw a text entry box with the words “fuzzy math,” which quickly jumped to a page on “fuzzy logic.” Ones and zeroes flashed randomly across the screen. In a reflection, Mackenzie saw Brazile staring. He turned off the monitor.

“What was that?” asked Brazile. “What was that about fuzzy logic?”

“You shouldn’t have seen that,” said Mackenzie quietly, trying to keep the anger out of his voice.

“But I did and now you have to tell me.”

“Doesn’t work that way,” said Mackenzie. “This is confidential – I couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to. Which I don’t. So don’t ask any questions, and stay away from the system.”

He could see that Brazile was about to press on. She could be as stubborn as Carville sometimes. Smiling gently he said, “It’s for your own good. Trust me.”

Brazile rolled her eyes and walked back to the wings. She looked out at her boss, and slowly shook her head. For all her coaching, for all the money they spent flying in style advisers, he still stood like he forgot to take the hanger out of his shirt. And why does he have to keep sighing! Doesn’t he know the microphone is still on? His heart is in the right place, thought Brazile, but if he doesn’t change his mannerisms, no one will care. I have to be firm with him this time. It will sting, but he can take it. It’s for his own good.

“It’s for your own good.” Damn it, could Mackenzie be any more patronizing? For God’s sake, Brazile’s entire job function was to recommend courses of action for *Al’s* own good. How could she do her job effectively if *Al’s* own staff was keeping secrets from her?

That’s it, she thought resoundingly. I must have a talk with Mr. Gore.

Matthew S. Schwartz

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Mackenzie sat in his hotel room, pouring over the logs from earlier that day. Brazile was right – something unexpected happened at every event. Those ones and zeroes were not supposed to pop up. Binary dumps were never intentional... and yet they were happening with more and more frequency. Could the program be degrading? Mackenzie racked his brain, trying to remember the original programmers' design specifications. Had they underestimated the required uptime?

No, thought Mackenzie, of course they hadn't. They knew it would have to be running for days, sometimes weeks at a time. The program wasn't degrading; it just didn't expect the wide, sometimes unpredictable range of input it was routinely subjected to. Typical queries – specifics on taxes, health care programs, the prescription drug plan – those were expected, and handled accordingly. Only the most completely illogical input caused problems. That's why Mackenzie was here – to deal with oddball input.

The job was proving more difficult than expected. Much more difficult. Damn, thought Mackenzie, why does Bush have to be such an idiot? Fuzzy math? Medicare? Where does he come up with these things? How can we anticipate a concept that doesn't exist, and that Bush doesn't even explain?

The phone rang. "I.T.," said Mackenzie.

"Mackenzie! Is that you?" The voice was fuming.

Mackenzie was floored. "Oh my God... is that... Willis, is that you?"

"My name is Doctor Gore, you son of a bitch!"

"What? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? What isn't wrong! Were your eyes open today?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Damn it, man, the debate! What on earth were you doing?"

"Just what I was, what I was supposed to be doing," Mackenzie stammered. "Monitoring the network connection, facilitating data access. Everything worked fine!"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"Who?"

"The vice-president! Did he not give you your new orders?"

"What new orders?"

"Oh my God... Mackenzie, I'm flying in. This... God damn it, this explains everything, I'm flying in tonight."

"Willis, what's going on?"

The phone was silent. For a moment, Mackenzie thought the connection had gone dead. Then he heard the death knell. "Cascade failure," Dr. Gore said solemnly.

"Doctor," he said, disbelieving, "this *can't* be happening. We have taken every precaution! There have been minor errors but I've caught them all! How can you be so sure about this?"

"There's no time to explain. I'll tell you at the lab. Three o'clock."

"*Doctor,*" said Mackenzie, panicking, "We have campaign stops all day tomorrow. We're taking off at dawn."

“Fuzzy Math”

“Mackenzie, we might not have until dawn! Depending on the rate of failure... the databanks will be wiped within days, maybe hours.”

“Of course... I didn't realize.” This was it. Mackenzie's worst nightmare was coming true – again. His lips were suddenly very dry. “Willis, is this it? Can we save it this time?”

For once, Dr. Gore's voice was calm, even inspirational. “We'll save him, John. We have to. Everything – *everything* – depends on it. Inform the vice-president. I'll see you at three.”

Matthew S. Schwartz

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He was already awake, of course; the vice-president rarely slept. Especially now, in these crucial final weeks before the election. At the moment, he and Brazile were holding a late-night strategy session to review what had happened that day, and what, in Brazile's opinion, must never happen again.

"The stiffness, I can deal with," said Brazile, pacing back and forth in the cramped hotel room. "I'm not worried because I think that, at this point, the American people have gotten used to it – which is a good thing, because you are apparently immune to every posture plan your style advisers have attempted."

"Now, Donna, be nice," said Gore, sitting perfectly upright on the edge of his bed. His southern drawl was more pronounced than usual.

"I said I'm not worried."

"I have tried to walk with grace, but it simply is not me." He stood up rigidly and placed his hands at his side. "This is how I hold myself, Donna. This is how I am. I, for one, think it is very presidential."

"You look like you're standing at attention."

"I have served in the military, you know. That may explain my preference for rigidity."

"Al, you were a journalist."

"A *military* journalist, Donna. In *Vietnam*."

"Fine," said Donna, spotting an opening. "In that case, let me ask you a military question."

"Shoot," said Gore. The edges of his mouth rose conspicuously. "Did you detect the pun?"

"Al, I understand you're trying. And that's fantastic. But let's forget about your sense of humor for just one second."

"Understood."

"In the service, Al, how would your superiors react to signs of..." She paused, searching for the right word. "Pomposity?"

Gore's eyes moved rapidly back and forth, as though that helped him to access his memory. Abruptly, the movement stopped, and he stared directly ahead. "When I was in the military, my editors did not tolerate displays of arrogance from myself, or from any other reporter."

"Your editors?"

"My superiors, yes."

"And, pray tell, what would count as a show of arrogance?"

Again, the rapid eye movements. "Different editors perceived things in different ways. Some would become irritated at the slightest head tilt, or even a sigh. Others only reprimanded me when I told them to their face that they were mistaken."

"I see..."

"They were mistaken, of course. I was always right."

"I bet they didn't care."

"Your bet would be handsomely rewarded. They refused to see the truth."

"They probably punished you."

“Fuzzy Math”

“Push-ups are not a punishment, Donna. They are an opportunity for growth, and in that respect I found value in them. But, yes, they were intended as punishment.” Gore sat down, brows furrowed. “However, I fail to see your point.”

Brazile stopped pacing, and stood directly in front of Gore. “Al, I know the team mentioned this briefly earlier tonight, but I want to make sure you get it.” She put her hands on his shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. Slowly, she said, “When given the choice between a lovable buffoon and an arrogant genius, a majority of Americans *will choose the buffoon.*”

Gore looked down, thinking. Brazile couldn’t read him. He looked up. “Americans prefer idiocy to intelligence?”

“No, Al, they prefer charm and humility over conceit and condescension.”

“It would follow that intelligent charmers have everything the public wants.”

“You’ve been working with just such a man for eight years and you’ve just now realized this?”

Images of Bill flashed through Gore’s vision. “He is a great man,” said Gore. “Even his fiercest opponents give him credit for his political proficiency.” He paused, thinking. “Bill and I compliment each other. What I lack in charisma, I make up for in my data capacity.”

“Your... data capacity? Al, are you okay?”

“Knowledge,” he corrected himself. He looked at Brazile – his gaze was steely. “What I lack in charisma, I make up for in knowledge.”

Something clicked. “Do you store that knowledge on a tape backup system?”

Gore couldn’t tell if she was joking.

The door swung open, and Mackenzie walked in, carrying a large leather pack on his shoulder. He was halfway into the room before he realized that Gore had company.

“Jesus, don’t you ever sleep?” said Mackenzie.

Brazile answered. “Are you talking to me or Al?”

“You. How can you be a good manager if you don’t get any rest?”

“I could ask the same of you, *IT.*” She spoke the letters with as much sarcasm as she could muster. “For your information, Al and I were just going over some crucial elements from tonight’s debate. And we have a lot more to discuss, so you’ll have to come back later.”

“Sorry Donna, Gore’s coming with me.”

“Excuse me?”

Gore stepped in. He was smiling, one eye slightly squinted. “Come on, Mack, you know George and I have a lot of work to do.” Briefly, his bottom lip covered the top. “I’m sorry, man,” he said, turning fully to Mackenzie. “This’ll have to wait until morning.”

They both looked at him, stunned. His voice was different – it was gravelly, breezier. The hanger was gone. His entire demeanor was different. Brazile couldn’t believe her eyes – he had, in one instant, changed from dull to vibrant, mechanical to alive. This was a new person, one she had never seen before.

But... she *had* seen this man before. He was close, she knew. Close to her, close to Al. But where... she couldn’t place it.

Matthew S. Schwartz

“What are you talking about, ‘George?’” said Brazile.

Gore jabbed Brazile in the arm. She flinched. “Aww, George, don’t be a baby. Come on, we got to work. Show me how to win them votes.” He smiled, nodding his head just a bit.

Brazile didn’t know what to say. She stared at him, her brows lowered, trying to decide if this was just what his sense of humor degenerated into when he was exhausted.

“Uh, Donna,” said Mackenzie, seeming to ignore the episode, “Al has been called away on urgent business. He has to come with me right now.” He firmly grabbed Gore’s upper arm and pulled him toward the door.

Gore resisted. “Maaaack,” he said, chuckling, “you don’t lay off and I might have to call in my boys!”

“Mr. Gore, this is extremely important.”

“Mack, Mack, Mack, what in the world could be *more* important than trying to win the White House? Now I’m stayin’ here with George and there ain’t nothin’ you can do about it.”

“Al,” said Brazile, “what the hell is going on? Why do you keep calling me George?”

“What else would I call you? Mister Steph-”

Mackenzie couldn’t allow this to continue. Donna can’t know, he thought, she *must not know*. Before Gore could even finish the word, he blurted out a 16-digit series of characters and numbers in rapid succession, a series he had memorized long ago.

“B 3 3 1 4 8 H 7 7 S 8 5 V P 9 3.”

Gore changed again. His expression returned to the blank, emotionless stare he was known for; his posture to the wooden, upright stance that had earned him so many taunts from the comedians. He held out his right hand. Brazile watched, dazed, as Mackenzie took it into his own hands and pressed down on Gore’s fingertips. He wasn’t touching them at random; there was a specific pattern, though Brazile couldn’t tell what it was.

After seven or eight taps, Gore withdrew his hand and placed his arm firmly against his side. Mackenzie walked toward the door, with Gore following close behind.

Brazile called out. “Mackenzie what the *hell* are you doing?”

“Confidential,” he said as he walked through the door.

She ran after him. “Damn it, Mackenzie, if you don’t tell me what you’re up to, so help me I’ll-”

He turned around, seething. “You’ll what? Have me relieved?”

She could see the veins standing out on his neck, the sweat dripping down his forehead. “Perhaps,” she said, more quietly than she would have liked.

“On whose authority?”

She looked at Gore. He was staring straight ahead, his face blank.

“Face it,” continued Mackenzie, “there are some things about Al that you just don’t know. You’ve been with him for, what, a year? I’ve been with him ever since the beginning.”

“Fuzzy Math”

“What beginning?”

He had said too much. “His political career. The House run. Now if you’ll excuse us, we have an appointment to keep.”

Mackenzie moved through the doorway at a brisk clip, the fastest he could walk without it being considered a jog. Gore followed closely behind, his long legs moving mechanically, his arms swinging slightly. Two secret service men posted outside the door took up the rear. Brazile simply stood there, mouth agape, as the elevator doors at the end of the hall opened and enveloped the crew within its depths.

She slowly backed into the room, looking from side to side down each direction of the hallway, as though something else might surprise her tonight. Completely through the doorway, she slammed the door shut, locking and chaining it. She leaned her forehead up against the door, holding her head with her hands. What just happened?

No, Donna, don’t do this, she told herself. Mackenzie was right -- there are so many things you just don’t know. If you keep questioning every strange thing that happens, you’ll go crazy. Just let Al do his job, and you worry about yours.

She walked to the desk in the corner, resolved to get some more work done before she went to sleep. If she could get any sleep. She picked up her outline of things to take care of before the next debate. She started to cross off number one, but stopped midway.

“Eye rolls,” she read aloud.

She shook her head. Damn it, she didn’t take care of that yet. They had started to talk, and she was making some headway, but then... Mackenzie! She closed her eyes. Why the hell can Mackenzie know things that I cannot? I don’t care if he’s been here longer; without me, there’s no campaign. And nothing he does with his computer can change any of that.

How important could his work possibly be? He said he’s been with Al since the beginning. But... in 1977, there were no personal computers. Nothing powerful enough to do anything *worthwhile*, at least. What use could Al possibly have had for him back then?

That’s it, she thought, secrets be damned. Tomorrow. I’m going to ask him tomorrow.

She looked down at her papers, and decided that there was nothing more she could do tonight – not without Al. She put down her pencil, and pondered the enigma that was Al Gore. She wasn’t too concerned; Al could act mighty strange at times, but things always returned to normal. She *was* frustrated, however, that she was conspicuously being left out of the loop.

As she considered laying her head down on the four-star pillow and drifting off, she was reassured by the knowledge that, though she was decidedly uninformed about many pressing issues, at least things with Al were probably as strange as they were going to get.

Matthew S. Schwartz

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Al Gore's head rested lightly in its docking port. At the moment, Gore's head was receiving a complete system upgrade from the local server, sitting under a metal desk in one corner of the room. The monitor, sitting on top of the desk, stated that it would take about two hours – assuming everything worked as it should, which it rarely did.

Al Gore's body stood just next to the desk, clamped upright inside the biopod, a titanium casket custom-built to Al's dimensions. A myriad of multicolored lights on either side of the pod blinked out its own unique rhythm. The orange triangular bulb on the pod's top flashed on and off like a strobe light to indicate that Gore's body was recharging.

Doctor Gore, a short, pudgy man in his late 60s, was stooped over at the waist, examining panel readouts on the front of the pod. With some effort, he stood up straight, and turned to Gore's head. The eyes were closed, and the lips were pursed tight, but Willis could swear that he looked at peace resting there on his docking port.

"I tell ya, John, it's amazing. After all these years, to see Al again, in the flesh!" He grinned, and looked over his shoulder at Mackenzie. "Poor choice of words, maybe?" He turned back to the biopod, gently pulling the strands of his thick white beard. He tapped at the plastic partition that separated Gore from the rest of humanity. "He's aged well."

"I don't know," said Mackenzie, tapping on a souped-up handheld. "He looks pretty old for a man of, what, thirty?"

"Activated on March 31st, 1970, so yes, thirty, in 'droid years. *Fifty-two* in human years." He reached out and brushed the back of his hand across Gore's cheek. "You do excellent work."

Mackenzie eyes bugged out as his handheld displayed the results of his calculation. "Not excellent enough, apparently. *Two days*."

Willis whistled. "I knew it was bad, but not *that* bad."

"When you think about it, it's even worse. Two days" – he tapped a button – "48 hours and 32 minutes, to be exact, for a *complete* system failure. But people would have noticed much earlier. Hell, Donna Brazile *witnessed* a Phase Two system decay!" He looked directly at the Doctor. "She's going to ask questions, Willis, there's no doubt."

"So she asks questions. No one has to answer her."

"She's not an idiot; that's why he hired her. She'll go right to Gore with this. She could ruin everything."

"John, you're panicking. She won't ruin anything. She talks to Gore, she asks him what was going on last night with the system decay—"

Mackenzie looked pained.

"She won't *call* it that, John! She'll think he was doing an imitation. He won't know what she's talking about, and that will be the end of it. With the upgrade, we won't have to worry about anything."

Mackenzie thought about this. He slipped the handheld into a pocket on his

“Fuzzy Math”

white lab coat. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Quite clearly, I am right. Now, how severe was this Phase Two decay?”

“How shall I put it,” Mackenzie said, pausing a moment. “He referred to Donna as George Stephanopoulos. And he was imitating everything. Voice, posture, lip move, *everything*. It still astounds me to see Gore acting like... well, like he has emotions. He had Clinton down pat!”

“Of course he did,” said Doctor Gore. “It was residual memory from the virtual reality helmet. He used it for hours on end, so it’s no wonder his engrams came to the surface.”

“But the engrams are ciphered so that only episodic memory remains. How could he retain Bill’s *personality*?”

“I told you: cascade failure.”

Mackenzie walked across the room, and placed a hand on Al Gore’s head. “How did you know?”

Doctor Gore took a seat next to the biopod. “I turned on the television to see my boy perform. Things seemed to be going fine. He started out with a very well-inflected oration about helping the rich versus helping the poor.”

“It’s a staple,” said Mackenzie.

“Of course it is. To a computer, anything other than populism is illogical. If X is greater than Y, you support whatever’s better for X.”

“That’s democracy.”

“That’s how you win votes,” said the Doctor. “And it was working. Some of it was brilliant! I counted it up, John. He used the phrase ‘one percent’ *ten times* during the debate. ‘More money on tax cuts for the wealthiest one percent than on education, health care, prescription drugs, national defense, *combined*.’ Or, ‘I don’t think we should give nearly half of the surplus to the wealthiest 1 percent, because the other 99 percent have had an awful lot to do with building this surplus and our prosperity.’ Ha! It was wonderful. How could a majority of people vote *against* helping themselves?”

Mackenzie sat down next to the Doctor, listening intently. “Then what was the *problem*?”

“Well I wasn’t sure there *was* a problem. The upgrade seemed to be working exactly as it should.”

Mackenzie looked confused. “What upgrade?”

“Exactly my point. You see, Bill was worried that Dubya’s mouth would ‘junk up Al’s gears,’ as he put it. I couldn’t have agreed more – though perhaps I would have worded it differently. In any case, I spent the past month working on a tactical response upgrade. You were supposed to install it before the first debate. But Gore never gave you the communiqué.”

“So those were my new orders.”

“And they were crucial. Did you hear the phrases Bush was using? They *didn’t exist*. He was making up words! Fuzzy math? Medicare?”

“Gore was prepared for Medicare – Newt and the rest introduced that term in ‘94, so it was in the database.”

“But the *way* Bush used it... Gore had said, ‘Why do the wealthiest one

Matthew S. Schwartz

percent get their tax cuts the first year, when 95 percent of seniors have to wait five years for a *penny*?” To which Bush replied, “The man’s running on *Mediscare*, trying to frighten people in the voting booth.’ That’s it! No statistics, no reasoned logic; all rhetoric. And bad rhetoric at that!”

Mackenzie closed his eyes. He saw the computer screen, saw Gore’s real time searches taking place, saw the binary dumps. “I had tried augmenting his tactical responsiveness with instant Net connectivity.”

Gore clapped his hands together. “I *knew* it!” He looked down, licking his lips, and then looked back up. “It’s the Palm Pilot, isn’t it.”

Mackenzie smiled. “It never leaves his side. Inserted into his belt clip, it gives him a wireless T1 line. All he has to do is run a search.”

Gore was beginning to see. “So when Bush talked about fuzzy math...”

“If it wasn’t in his database, he’d access parallel search engines. If the phrase ‘fuzzy math’ was anywhere on the Internet, Gore would have access to it.”

“John, that’s brilliant!”

“No, you were right – Gore couldn’t handle Bush’s responses. They were just *too* illogical, too unexpected. There were always problems.” He thought for a moment. “You still haven’t told me how you knew.”

Doctor Gore sighed and rolled his eyes with ferocity. Mackenzie looked puzzled – so Gore intensified the sighs. Slowly, Mackenzie smiled. “*That* tipped you off? But how?”

“Do you realize how hard we worked to get his expressions right? Weeks, maybe months! Those eye rolls were a sign to me that something was wrong. Bush’s responses were throwing off his entire program. The fact that his physical systems were degrading told me that *everything* was breaking down.”

Mackenzie pursed his lips. He remained silent.

“Oh, John, you couldn’t have known. You weren’t involved with the original construction.”

“But I’ve *studied* the code for years! I see schematics in my dreams. And I *saw* the expressions, I just... I guess I didn’t put two and two together.”

Doctor Gore smiled warmly. “Don’t kick yourself. What matters is that we caught it in time.” He looked at blue progress bars on the monitor. “And we’re taking care of *everything*. There was also something wrong with his ‘random’ function – he kept coming back to that one anecdote about the senior citizen with the prescription drug costs. Winifred something?”

“Yes, Winifred. In her *Winnebago*. I noticed that too,” said Mackenzie. “I still don’t know why that happened. ‘Random’ has been working fine up until now!”

“Think about it, John. What do those two words start with?”

Mackenzie thought for a second. “‘Win’? Are you saying his program was so obsessed with *winning* that the term became ingrained in all parts of the system?”

Doctor Gore smiled. “It’s even simpler than that. You’re going to kick yourself.”

Mackenzie looked up, lightly biting his lower lip. “Winifred... Winnebago... Win...” He slapped his forehead. “W!”

“Dubya was making such a mess of Gore’s internal logic circuits that the name

“Fuzzy Math”

– the *letter* – spread through his program like a virus. It affected his reasoning, his expressions, everything. But I’ve taken care of that. And soon my boy is going to be better than ever.”

“Let’s hope,” said Mackenzie.

For the next two hours, Doctor Gore regaled Mackenzie with technical details of Al Gore’s creation. The details would have put anyone else to sleep, but to Mackenzie they were like an instant dose of caffeine, keeping his mind active, interested, and awake.

Every now and then Doctor Gore would ask a question about the new systems that had been installed, or Al’s current maintenance schedule, or something else of little pressing concern. Yet, Mackenzie got the feeling that the Doctor was throwing those questions in so it would appear that he truly cared about what Mackenzie did. Oh, Mackenzie knew the Doctor cared... but he also knew that his *real* enthusiasm existed in his memories of years past, when he got to confront so many technological conundrums, to break so much new ground! And of course, when Al Gore, Senior, was still alive.

So whenever the Doctor asked Mackenzie a question, Mackenzie would quickly answer it, and then ask another question about the past. And the Doctor would smile, and close his eyes, and remember. It made the Doctor so happy to recall; thus, it made Mackenzie so happy to ask.

But as much as he wanted to, Mackenzie didn’t ask about what he was really interested in. The first – and only – time Mackenzie had asked, he was quickly berated by both Willis and Al Gore, Senior. It was a *mistake*, they yelled, never to be repeated! There were not enough funds, not enough research. The machinery was faulty; the programming was faulty. His logic processors, speech generators, ethical subroutines – *nothing* ever worked properly! It was long forgotten, defunct, smashed into a million parts that would never be whole again. Never ask about the past!

That was seven years ago. He had kept quiet since then, and he tried not to think about it during the day... but at night, in his dreams, he couldn’t control where his mind went. And there, in the darkness, he would find it. Deep in a forgotten basement, away from harsh light of the world, but *intact*, and alive, and ready to be awakened...

Though Mackenzie wouldn’t admit it to himself, he knew that somewhere, somehow, Doctor Gore’s *first* creation survived.

Matthew S. Schwartz

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Donna Brazile paced about the conference room on Air Force 2. The plane was on the runway, waiting to take off. It was 8:30; they were supposed to leave at 8, yet Gore and Mackenzie had not arrived. This would throw off the rest of the day. Where were they?

Brazile peeked into the main cabin. She saw Tipper sitting in the front of the plane, chatting with friends and other officials. Brazile walked up to her. "Can I see you for a moment?"

The two walked into the conference room. Brazile got right to the point. "Do you know where Al is?"

"I think he's with Mackenzie," said Tipper.

"They left last night, citing urgent, confidential business. They haven't returned. Do you know what he's doing?"

"You would think, wouldn't you?" She sighed. "When it comes to his job, Al doesn't play around. If it's confidential, he doesn't tell me."

Brazile nodded. "They generally don't tell me anything confidential, either, but I usually have *some* idea of what your husband is up to."

Tipper laughed. "Oh, Donna, you shouldn't be concerned. You've only been with him for a year now. Why, before the campaign, he would disappear for days on end. But he always returns, so I've learned to stop asking questions. It's a lot less stressful that way."

"I still don't know how you live with it."

"Honey, when you're married to the vice-president of the US, you *have* to. But..." She walked outside the conference room and returned two seconds later with a tiny bottle. "These do tend to make it easier."

Brazile smiled and took the bottle; Tipper returned to her seat. Oh, what the hell, thought Donna. She undid the cap, and downed it in one swig.

"I sincerely hope you will not be flying today, Donna."

She turned around. "Al! Do you know what time it is?"

"By my clock, it is time to take off." The plane started to move, quickly picking up speed. Gore motioned to one of a dozen empty chairs. "Please, have a seat."

She remained standing. "Al, where were you last night?"

"Now, Donna, why do you have to ask that? You know I cannot tell you."

"I ask because I don't see what" – she lowered her voice – "I don't see what business *Mackenzie* has knowing things that I don't."

Gore sighed. "Donna—"

"And another thing. Why did you keep calling me George last night? And what was that code that Mackenzie used? Were those nuclear codes?"

Gore looked confused. "Donna, I have no idea what you are talking about. Last night, we..." He paused, trying to remember. "You and I were going over the debate. You had a delightful little insight about intelligent charmers... or maybe that was me... and then Mackenzie and I had an urgent matter to attend to. I assure you, it had nothing to do with you, and you need not concern yourself with it."

“Fuzzy Math”

The plane was barreling down the runway, and Brazile felt obliged to sit. As her ears began to plug, she realized that she was never going to get an answer out of Al. She sighed, rolling her eyes slightly.

That reminded her. “Al,” she said, dropping the subject, “about last night.”

“I was brilliant, was I not?”

“For the most part, yes. But I’m concerned that people might think you’re a little *too* brilliant...”

“Donna,” he said, holding up a hand, “say no more. Mackenzie already warned me about the eye rolls. I promise I will not do that again.”

Brazile gave a slight nod, and walked out of the conference room. Perfect, she thought. Not only is Gore sharing secrets with Mackenzie; now he’s getting *campaign* advice from him too! She grabbed another bottle and sat down next to Tipper. Tipper, who had learned to live with days, maybe weeks away from her husband; Tipper, who could share the most confidential, important secrets of her life with Al, but would never be privy to the same level of trust from him. Why does she have no problem dealing with it, and I get angry when he doesn’t share *one thing* with me?

Because she loves him. She loves him, and he loves her. And since she knows that, she can trust him even if he *doesn’t* tell her things. Tipper’s job is to love Al, regardless of what he doesn’t tell her.

A sudden clarity.

My job, she realized, is to make Al the next president of the United States, regardless of what he doesn’t tell me.

Well, if that’s my job, then that’s what I’m going to do. Because no matter what I *don’t* know, one thing is immensely clear: while America loves an endearing buffoon, it *needs* a genius in the White House. Al Gore is that genius. And Al Gore is going to win.

Air Force 2 lifted off the runway, and soared into the sky.

Matthew S. Schwartz

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The anchorman was tired. He had been standing early in the evening, but now he barely had the energy to *sit*, let alone announce the photo finish that was the 2000 presidential election.

“Well, it’s one a.m. in the eastern United States,” he said, weary, “and we are grasping at tiny straws to see which way the wind actually may be blowing. But as far as we’re concerned, there is still no change. Mr. Gore and Mr. Bush each have 242 electoral votes, and the outstanding too-close-to-call states are Oregon, and Nevada, Wisconsin, and Florida.”

Al Gore and friends watched, helpless, as his fate was tallied. He received up to date results instantly, but hearing the anchors say it always made it so much more real.

Everyone was there – his staff, family, friends. Bill was at the White House, but they had kept in regular phone contact. Only one person was missing.

“He would have wanted to see this,” said Al. “He would have been so proud of me.”

His father *was* looking down on Al, his family reassured him. He was probably doing everything in his power to tilt the fates toward his son.

Al told his family that that was illogical. He walked into his private office, and closed the door.

Doctor Gore and Mackenzie looked at each other. There was nothing they could do for Al now, said Doctor Gore. He would have to wait it out.

A television blared. “It must be so excruciating,” said a bodiless head. “We’re all talking about this unbelievable mystic historical moment, but imagine how the candidates are feeling. One of them will soon be hearing ‘Hail to the Chief’; the other one will be finished and saying to themselves, ‘What if I had only done this?’ Gore could be saying, ‘What if I only hadn’t sighed?’ God, they must be going crazy right about now.”

“Willis, she’s right,” said Mackenzie. “Can he handle the pressure?”

“Of course,” the Doctor answered quietly. “You keep thinking of him as a person. You have to remember – he *has no emotions*.”

Willis is right, thought Mackenzie. Al is a machine. A fabulous machine, but nothing more. He can run through scenarios until the end of time; he will still never feel.

Donna Brazile knocked at the door to Al’s office. There was no response. Reaching down, she found that the door was unlocked. She opened it a tad.

“Al?”

No answer.

She slowly pushed her way inside. The door creaked as it opened. Al was sitting in his high-back leather chair, facing away from Brazile. The chair was so high, she couldn’t see the top of his head. All she could see were his arms, grasping both armrests so tightly that his knuckles were white.

“Al, are you all right?”

“Fuzzy Math”

She moved toward his desk. He still wouldn't move. She reached across the desk and turned the chair around. As it turned, and she saw what was behind it, she prayed that this was a nightmare.

Mackenzie was watching TV. Someone was saying that this may be the closest vote in the history of the country. Suddenly, a scream pierced the air. Mackenzie and the Doctor knew at once that it was Brazile, and they ran to Al's office before anyone else.

They stood there, in shock. Al sat at his desk, his head in his lap. He was not moving. Brazile's face was pale. Her hands were shaking. Mackenzie grabbed her, held her in his arms. Doctor Gore closed and locked the door before anyone else could see.

Someone knocked loudly on the door. “Secret Service,” shouted a voice. “Is everything okay?”

Mackenzie answered. “Everything's fine. We'll be right out.”

That was, of course, a lie. He knew that he would have to explain everything. He also had to fix Al.

“Th-this can't be,” Brazile stammered. She looked to Mackenzie. “This is a nightmare... tell me it's a nightmare!”

“Oh, it's a nightmare,” said the Doctor, “but not the kind you're thinking of.”

She didn't recognize this man. “Who are you? What's going on?”

“My name is Doctor Willis Gore,” he said. “As for what's going on... that's going to take some explaining.”

“Gore? Are you related to Al?”

“You could say that.”

“Doctor,” said Mackenzie, frantic, “did he... did he do this on purpose?”

“I don't know,” said the Doctor.

Mackenzie turned to Brazile, sweating. “Donna, we're going to tell you what's going on but you have to *swear* never to tell anybody.”

This is it, she thought. This is the confidential business. She felt a lump in her throat. Now that she knew what it was about, she no longer had any desire to know the details. “Forget it,” she said, making her way to the door. “I don't need to know anything.”

Doctor Gore blocked her path. “Oh yes you do. You have to know what's going on, and why this is so important, or else you might tell someone. And we can't have that.”

“Fine,” she said. If they were going to force her to know, she was going to know *everything*. She walked to the chair where Al was sitting. His head was laying on its side, eyes open, staring straight ahead. “Who the *hell* is that? Where's the real Al?”

Mackenzie didn't know how to begin; he looked to Doctor Gore, who breathed heavily. “There was a real Al Gore, at one time,” the Doctor said slowly, “but he was killed in Vietnam. That,” he said, pointing, “is Al Gore, the android.”

She looked at the base of his head. There were connections with wires sticking out. She looked back at the Doctor. “Go on,” she said.

“The Senator Albert Gore, Senior, loved his son very deeply. When he learned

Matthew S. Schwartz

what had happened to his son, he contacted me. Why me, you wonder. Well, I am a computer engineer, and I was one of the pioneers of the field. The fact that I am his cousin also played a role. My job was to create a robotic replica of his son, so that he would have someone to follow in his footsteps. We created AI to be as lifelike as possible. Even his family doesn't know the truth."

Brazile's eyes widened. "You mean Tipper..."

Mackenzie answered. "Tipper doesn't know. Neither do the girls."

Her face was awash in confusion. "*His* girls?"

Doctor Gore looked uneasy. "The real AI Gore had saved a sample of himself in the sperm bank before he left for the war. We simply impregnated his wife during the night."

Brazile laughed. It was a laugh of horror. She continued, shaking her head. "And what if he wins? Will we have a robot running the country?"

Doctor Gore and Mackenzie looked at each other. Mackenzie shook his head, his gaze drilling into the Doctor. But the Doctor answered her anyway. "The Constitution prohibits presidents from serving more than two terms. Mr. Clinton, however, feels that that Amendment is – how shall I say – *faulty*."

It suddenly snapped into place. "Don't tell me—"

Doctor Gore nodded. "If AI wins, Bill serves another term."

"But how?"

"AI is remotely controllable. With a virtual reality helmet and a body suit, Bill can watch from inside as AI goes about his business. Or, if he wants, he can control AI's actions and words. From anywhere."

This was too much for Donna. It was crazy – none of it made any sense. And yet, at the same time, it all made perfect sense. It explained everything. And the truth was unbearable.

She started sweating, shaking. Her eyes rolled backward, and her head hit the ground.

By the time she arose, the truth would no longer matter.

“Fuzzy Math”

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President Bush sat at his desk in the Oval Office. He looked down and saw the seal on the rug. He looked across the room and admired the life size portrait of his father. It was beautiful. And George knew that, without his father's support, he would never have made it this far.

He leaned back in his chair, and put his hands behind his head. “Thank you, Dad.”

* * *

The man leaned back in his chair. He was home. And it was a marvelous feeling.

“Thank *you*,” he said.

He put his hands behind his head, and removed the helmet.