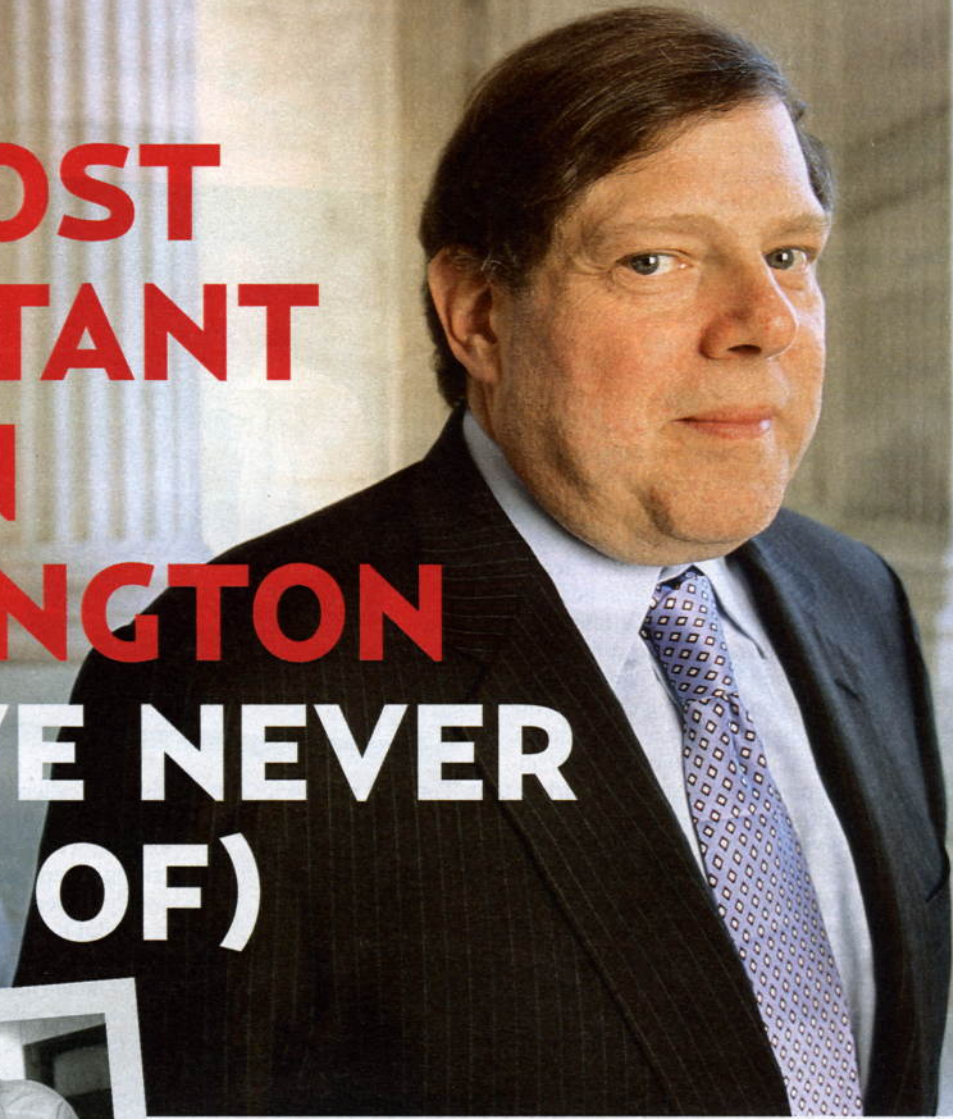


# THE MOST IMPORTANT MAN IN WASHINGTON (YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF)



COURTESY MARK PENN'S OFFICE

King of polls Mark Penn helped Bill Clinton to win, tells Bill Gates what to do, and BP and Ford hang on his every word. No wonder Tony Blair is all ears

REPORT **DAVID CHARTER** PORTRAIT **MARTIN SIMON**

Bill Gates is on line one and Bill Clinton is on hold. Hillary's people want to talk. Later, there will be a conference call with Tony Blair. Welcome to the world of Mark Penn.

With his untucked shirt and unkempt hair, Penn doesn't look like a man in demand by some of the most senior corporate and political figures on both sides of the Atlantic. If Hollywood were to cast him they would surely choose Tom Cruise or Michael Douglas. Not John Goodman.

Penn has a reputation for dog-like loyalty and obsessive secrecy. Colleagues describe him as touchy and aloof. He has also fallen out with some of his clients, such as Al Gore, who rejected Penn's suggestions to use the Clinton effect in his presidential campaign. Rather unkindly, his nickname at the Clinton White House was "Schlumbo".

All of this perhaps helps to explain why, even at the peak of his influence, this 51-year-old New York-born pollster is still referred to as the most important man in Washington you've never heard of. Yet in the upper echelons of the corporate and political world, he has never been more in demand. Who else would be trusted to advise both Microsoft and AOL?

The walls of Penn's seventh-floor office in Washington DC bear ample testament to his sought-after skills. Above a sofa facing his desk hangs a front page from *The Washington Post*. Just below the "Clinton Acquitted" headline is a handwritten note: "Thanks - Bill". On the far side of the room is a display of his new campaign for Ford, the latest troubled mega-corp to seek out the Penn touch.

## MARK PENN

« In the corridor next to a signed copy of Clinton's 1996 inauguration address is a photo of a beaming Tony Blair. It is inscribed "Mark. You were brilliant. Thank you." During last year's general election, while the Conservatives crowded about Lynton Crosby, their expensive consultant from Australia, Penn just got on with the job of winning.

He had been recommended to Blair by Bill Clinton when they met at Ronald Reagan's funeral in June 2004. Penn and a small team started working for Labour that September. Unnoticed by the media, he met Blair almost every day of the 2005 election campaign. Penn took the Labour leader through his numbers and his analysis, gleaned from 25,000 telephone interviews with British swing voters from call centres in Washington and Denver, divining which message to push on a particular day and the best way to counter Conservative attacks. He even came up with Labour's election slogan. Commentators at the time remarked that "Forward not Back" sounded a little, well, American. They didn't know the half of it.

To begin to understand Mark Penn's powers, you need to know about his extraordinary career path. Penn was ten when his father, a Polish chicken farmer, died. His mother, a teacher whose parents were Hungarian, went back to work to put him through private school in the Bronx. He was 13 when he carried out his first poll. By interviewing classmates, Penn discovered that they were more liberal than the nation as a whole on civil rights. At Harvard he teamed up with Doug Schoen, his business partner for 30 years. They polled on every subject dear to a student's heart, just for fun.

Penn's awkwardness may help explain his obsession with polling. During the early days, he admitted that by analysing targeted surveys "you could find out what people thought without talking to them". Soon it was time to put this unusual hobby to practical use. The bright young graduates formed their own company and were enlisted on to Ed Koch's team for the 1977 New York mayoral campaign. Political pollsters are two a penny, of course. Every campaign uses some method of surveying the electorate's mood to help them order priorities and track progress. Polling has become as much a part of politics as making speeches and kissing babies. What makes Penn different is what happened next.

When the giant US telephone company AT&T started losing market share, it asked Penn and Schoen whether they could apply political polling to the telecoms sector. As part of the pitch for the contract, they prepared a presentation that compared party identification to brand loyalty, political delivery to customer satisfaction and campaign pledges to special offers. Instead of swing voters, the pair would identify persuadable customers. Corporate "message polling" was born.

What Penn and Schoen do is to identify and deconstruct clientele or voters by sifting the general population through a series of attitudinal questions – often as mundane as which TV shows they prefer – and then testing in minute detail the exact offers or phrases that will draw them in. As Bill Clinton said, his pollsters did not merely diagnose or explain, "they tell me what to do".



Penn has refined his art – or is it a science? – to a 20-minute lifestyle conversation in which the individual reveals habits and preferences, and then acts as a sounding board to assess how different versions of a national campaign will work for different audiences.

"It would be hard for you to come up with a subject that I haven't polled on," says Penn. "What we do is really quite different from what the public thinks we do. We help inform clients about what's happening and how they can take their message and move it to the next level to be successful in their campaigns. So we are about helping them to communicate what it is they want to communicate. And to do so with the aid of research."

Penn and Schoen's campaign for AT&T became part of marketing folklore. Within six weeks, they had demolished the "Friends & Family" appeal of rival firm MCI. They analysed the lucrative long-

distance callers market using the same kind of lifestyle indicators they used to identify potential Koch voters. They determined that existing AT&T advertising was aimed at loyal customers and missed "swing voters" such as immigrants making calls home. These were swiftly wooed with a series of targeted deals.

But it was not just the special offers that did the trick. AT&T's appeal was buttressed through its "Your True Voice" ad campaign which linked its deals to the company's values of reliability and quality. This set a pattern that Penn has refined over the years to help his clients find a message that really resonates.

Dick Morris, who brought Schoen and Penn into Clinton's ailing re-election campaign in 1995, once said: "All of American industry in recent years has moved toward values as a selling point. Southwest Airlines doesn't run an airline, it gives people freedom. He [Penn] brought that perspective into the Clinton campaign."

The whole point for Penn is that the message is not just an empty soundbite. If it doesn't resonate, it won't have impact. "I was much affected in college by reading a book by V. O. Key that said the voters are not fools. He traced elections back to show it wasn't the colour of the candidate's tie, there were real choices," he says.

"Confidence in leadership is not irrational. Who you think can lead the country in a terrorist event and how you think the health service should be structured and how that will affect you, these are real things. This kind of detailed message polling that we do is based on a model of the electorate which is a thinking electorate. It reads, it understands, it acts."

How to distil this into a campaign message? At a meeting of Labour's inner inner circle last February – including Blair, Alastair Campbell and Philip Gould – to come up with a slogan, Penn suggested "Forwards Not Backwards". It was much liked but still needed to be "message polled". So Penn took it and, along with rival phrases, submitted it to the same kind of rigorous assessment as the latest Ford slogan. Around 50 interviewers from his call centre in Denver talked to 1,000 British homes to identify the 100 or so who were swing voters.

"The more anonymous, the more long-distance, the more people feel free to reveal their



Previous page, inset: Mark Penn with Bill Clinton. This page, from top: Tony Blair's gratitude; Labour slogan, coined by Penn

