

# Judy Woodruff: Inside Politics

CNN's award-winning political journalist on the power of war, peace, politics, and media to inspire kids' interest in elections.

INTERVIEW BY JEFF CARTER



**J**UDY WOODRUFF, A 30-YEAR VETERAN OF BROADCAST JOURNALISM, is currently a CNN anchor and host of CNN's *Inside Politics*. This past year, Woodruff helped anchor the network's coverage of the space shuttle *Columbia* tragedy and the war in Iraq. In April 2003, Woodruff moderated the first debate between the 2004 Democratic presidential candidates, sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund. She is a multiple-award winner and founding co-chair of the International Women's Media Foundation, an organization dedicated to promoting and encouraging women in communication industries worldwide.

Woodruff has reported on every national political convention and presidential campaign since 1976. *Access Learning* spoke with her on the eve of the first "Rock the Vote" Democratic presidential candidate forum.

**Access Learning:** Were you interested in politics when you were a kid?

**Judy Woodruff:** I was a little, but not that much because I was in a military family. My father was in the army and we moved around a lot when I was growing up. I didn't live in the United States until I was an older teenager. You could say that I was soaking up the world when I was growing up, which was great. But when it comes to American politics, I probably did not pay a great deal of attention until I was getting out of high school. I remember distinctly the John Kennedy-Richard Nixon election in 1960. I was in high school when that election happened, and of course I remember three years later vividly, when President Kennedy was assassinated. I'm sure that kids [now] and the people who are educating them will all remember 9/11. It's a pivotal event; something that will define their generation.

**AL:** What are the issues or events that you think are most likely to motivate young people to pay attention to politics today?

**JW:** No question, the war [in Iraq] is hugely important because President Bush has staked his reelection campaign largely on this war and the successful outcome of it. In February, I would bet there will still be over 100,000 troops in Iraq—American troops—most of them young men between 18 and 28 or 30, because that's who fights for this country. So that's a clear reason for young people to pay attention. President Bush has essentially said we fight this war in Iraq because we would rather fight for our national security on other shores than our own—we don't want the terrorists bringing their terror to our shores, especially after 9/11—and I don't think anyone would disagree with that. But that means we have to fight it somewhere, and the question is, do people agree with the way the president is conducting the war? If they do, then they should vote for him, or talk to their parents about it, because even if they're not of voting age yet, they will be before long, and it's going to matter to them.

Another big issue in the past year has been about copyright and whether it is legal to download music or movies. Kids listen to music and download music on the Internet. It's not the simple thing that it once was—people have gone to court over it. There's been a ruling handed down that it's illegal. I think it's a discussion that every family should have and every school should have, about what's the right thing to do. That's an

issue that politicians have something to say about. The people they appoint to different commissions have something to say about it. These things matter to kids.

**AL:** You've covered politics and government for many years. What are the biggest changes you've seen in the coverage of politics and the election process in recent years?

**JW:** The speed! If it was at the speed of sound before, it's the speed of light now. Because of television, 24-hour news channels like CNN, and the Internet, when politicians say something today, you hear about it right away. And not only what they said, but the reaction to it as well.

**AL:** As someone who is working in television, is there anything you would advise people to look for when they're watching the television coverage of politics—particularly the upcoming presidential election?

**JW:** Watch for the smart information on what is going on, on what the candidates are saying, what voters are saying, what the candidates are saying about each other, and what they are saying about themselves. Listen very closely to the candidates and hold them accountable. They all need to be held accountable. Read newspapers, read magazines, and watch shows, not just *Inside Politics* and *CNN Student News*, but other political shows too.

**AL:** What do you think turns people off about politics?

**JW:** I think it's a combination of things. I think some of it is that people have seen politicians get kind of down and dirty with each other and criticize each other, and sometimes I think people just get sick of that. They're fed up with

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hearing people criticized. But the fact is that this criticism is often at the root of the disagreements that politicians have, and when they disagree over issues and have real differences of opinion, then it matters. What nobody wants to see is mudslinging and the gratuitous slamming of somebody else just for the sake of slamming, [but] most of the criticism I've seen this year has been based in issues. I hear Democrats criticizing President Bush, but they're saying it because they disagree with his policies. And you hear the president disagreeing with Democrats, but it's because he has a different view. I think a lot of that is healthy. It indicates that we have a healthy society. Many places on Earth, you can't have that kind of debate in politics. We're very lucky to be able to argue like we do.

**AL:** To what degree do you think that media coverage affects people's attitudes towards politics?

**JW:** I'm sure that it does affect their attitudes. In some ways, I see people getting more interested because of media coverage—we cover the debates, we cover the disagreements, we cover the speeches, we cover the candidate announcements, we cover everything. And that, I hope, gets people interested. But I can also see how sometimes that turns them off.

I think it's up to us in the news media to be conscious of that and to always remember that our primary mission is to inform people. Sure, we want to keep them interested, and there's a lot of pressure on us to figure out ways to make it interesting so that people will pay attention, but we've got to figure out a way to cover it in a way that is responsible and interesting, and that's tough because some of these issues are, frankly, difficult to explain. I mean, budget issues, tax issues, health care—there are some really intricate details that have to be worked out when legislation, for example, is being worked out in the Congress.

**AL:** Do you think the Internet may help with that, in the sense that it can complement the television coverage by allowing you to go more in depth?

**JW:** Absolutely, because there's more and more pressure on us in commercial television news to make everything shorter. And as a result of that, we have to have a place where people can go for more information, more in-depth, and the Internet is the logical place to do that. I'm thinking about the *CNN Student News* companion Web site—they will have more information on the Web than we can possibly have time for on television, and that's crucial.

**AL:** And it's a medium that kids gravitate to.

**JW:** Yes, and they're very comfortable with it, much more comfortable with it than their parents are. Kids can go on the Internet and do two or three things [at once]. They can be instant-messaging their friends at the same time they're reading about what Howard Dean said when he was in New Hampshire yesterday.

**AL:** You've moderated several presidential debates. What is that experience like?

**JW:** It's incredibly exciting. It's an extraordinary honor to be able to do that, to be able to mix it up with the candidates and try to pose questions to them that will get them thinking and allow voters to see a side of them they haven't already shown on the campaign trail.

**AL:** Some people think the debates are boring.

**JW:** Gosh, I don't. The candidates—it's all completely unscripted. It's up to the moderator, and whoever is asking questions, to pose a question that is going to get them off of their standard stump speech. What we want to do is hear them tackle some of the issues and questions that they didn't already talk about on the campaign trail—in other words, to try to peel away a layer. That's what it's all about. <

## Related Resources

### Cable Programming

**CNN Student News**, HLN M–F, 3:12pm ET

**Inside Politics**, CNN M–F, 3:30pm ET

### Online

**CNN Student News**  
cnnstudentnews.com

Current-events news site features a daily lesson plan and streaming video for *CNN Student News*, educator guides for *CNN Presents: Classroom Edition*, news reports, activities correlated to national standards, archived materials, and more.