

Benjamin Rosenthal

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I asked him question 1 and I put into it specifically "how often you were going to go home, what kind of district staff you wanted, that kind of thing". He said "That goes a long way back. Do you want a serious answer to this question?" I said I did and he started in.

"This may sound trite, but my old district leader, the man through whose beneficence I am here, was an enlightened old time leader. He had a taste of German socialism in him--for example, his was the first old time club that solicited blacks for members. He was a different kind of cat. He said "Good government is good politics". He wanted to produce good candidates. I have never held public office before, I had never run before, but I knew that I wanted to do a good job and that a good job had good political residuals."

"I wanted to strengthen the staff in New York and in Washington. When I was first elected my family was back in New York and I was back there all the time. At the same time the job of the congressman was changing--I think it was my first year that we stayed in until Christmas Eve. When I first was elected I saw it as not a full-time, year round job. I thought I would keep my law practice. But because of the change in the nature of the job I moved my family down here. I was enormously frightened of the political affect of that move. The New York Times

supported it, however, and took a lot of the heat off. But many people in Queens were upset. My predecessor had had a district office in Rego Park--a modest office. I moved it to a better location, on Queens Boulevard in Forest Hills. About the same time Congress was providing more staff. So I had the motivation to strengthen my staff and I was able to get more from Congress. If anything, my attitude has been strengthened over time. My Queens office is as strong a service-oriented office as possible--in fact we have solicited clients. I have been holding town meetings throughout the district. In order to get people to come, I send six to seven thousand letters to postal patrons. I tell them in that letter if they can't come to the meeting and they have a problem to get in touch with my office. So I've tried to create business; in all these ways I think good government is good politics."

He then went on to talk about his new man, Rowan, who goes to community meetings. "He goes to every little two-bit community meeting in the district. He loves to do it, and he's well suited to it. He served on a community planning council, so this is what he was going to do anyway. And he's got a lot of political pluses for me--he comes from Woodside and he is big among the Catholic war veterans." Later, Ben showed me a letter from a community or neighborhood group praising Rowan's presence at one of their meetings and said that his presence proved that Ben was interested in all of his constituents and it was a very flattering letter for Ben. Rowan also sends back memoranda from each of these meetings telling Ben how they went, who had what problems and so forth, and Ben showed me some of these letters. He was very pleased with them.

2. "It's a middle income, bedroom, New York oriented district. It has a high level of ethnics, a high level of subway people and all kinds of special interests and groups." I kept waiting for him to say some more about that but he stopped.

2B. When I asked him if there were any groups he felt he understood less than other groups he answered "There are lots of groups that don't understand me. But I understand them. It's just that our philosophies, our ideologies, our backgrounds are different. With them I do the best I can. The vast majority of people in the district, 80% of them, don't fit into any groups--they are not antagonistic or alert. In Woodside and Sunnyside you have very strong Right to Life groups. You have St. Sebastian's Church, a bulwark of conservative Catholicism with a very active priest, Father Curran. I'm on the wrong end of the stick with those folks. So I actively try to service them--not any more or less than other groups in the district. But I went to a parade at St. Sebastian's and gave awards to some marching group they have there."

"The orthodox Jews are on the right side of the political ledger. They are becoming more active on busing, on scatter sight housing, on affirmative actions quota programs. And I'm not one of their most popular people now."

In Corona, I've been outspoken against the Greek Junta. The people back home have not understood my position which I think is much better for Greece. But they are older people, many of them are newly arrived in this country. They hesitate to be critical. Whatever group

is in power, that's alright with them."

Here I inserted the identification question--ques. 24. He said he identified very strongly with the people who were early on against the war. That he had been way out in front on that issue and that people identified very closely with him. He said that this group was into other things now.

"In terms of Israel, all elements respect me--whether they are Orthodox or the rest of the crowd. They think I've done a good job on my committee."

"I've tried to make myself available. There's no political figure in Queens that could get people as I have to come to the town meetings. They don't come to see the Congressman, they come because they want to talk to the Congressman. Each meeting has a different flavor. I try to identify with each community."

He said he had also had good relations with the senior citizens and said he had worked at that too.

"Until the last reapportionment, I was a classic representative of the district. The district is changing. I lost Forest Hills--a constituency on the same wave length. And it was replaced by Woodside and Sunnyside, where I'm not on the same wave length. Though I did get some of Bayside which is more like Forest Hills. I find there is a direct relation between income and political philosophy--the higher the income the more liberal the philosophy, the lower the income the less liberal the philosophy."

"A lot of the Orthodox Jews consider me too far out."

23. I stuck this in here because it seemed to be the right place. I asked it by saying that assuming consumer affairs and foreign policies were his two major interests, were those interests the same as those of his constituents? "If, under consumer interests, you include economic issues, then we're interested in the same thing." I asked him then question 4 and all he said was that the previous district had been more homogeneous than his present district.

4H. "TV is like hopeless in New York." He said the radio tried very hard and that he did quite well on the radio "fairly good", because they need news. "We work with the print media much better--the Long Island News, the Post and the Times."

4I. It was here where he made his comment about the people getting more liberal the wealthier they got.

4J. "Many Spanish are moving in. (He had no idea what percentage.) And the district is getting older. The new area in Jackson Heights is older and more Spanish than it was when I had it several years ago. In northern Bay side, we are getting some high rises. And there you have a confrontation but it involves the middle and upper middle classes."

4K. & 4L. He thought the relative strength of the parties was quite stable and he did consider it to be a safe Democratic district.

8D. He answered the conservative and the conservative Republicans. "The Republicans figure they can't beat me. The Conservatives are ideologues

and they want to proselytize for their cause. So they run whether they can beat me or not--they don't care." It was interesting when I asked him about his opposition in the past and whenever that came up, that he could not remember the names of the people who had run against him. At several points he tried but couldn't remember, and at several points when I put in a name, he said that he couldn't remember and then he finally said "They're all the same to me". The point is that he can't remember them, they all run about the same against him. And they're all equally nondescript. I laughed and indicated that he mustn't worry a heck of a lot about them if he couldn't even remember any of their names or keep any of the elections straight. He laughed too. And that's when he said "They're all the same to me."

8E. He couldn't give an answer to that but he struggled with it in connection with question 8F.

8F. He said traditional party loyalty was first, national issues second, and his own personal qualities third and he said State and local issues were "at the bottom". He also said that "The first three may be interchangeable."

He wrestled with this question a little bit when I asked him if it would make a difference if another Democrat ran. "Of course, yes. Twelve years of super duper service must have some value. I don't think it's as pronounced in our district as it is in others--Otis Pike for example. But I don't want to over-emphasize party. The majority of the people vote party lines, but many of them know me.

I fit into the pattern they're prepared to follow anyway." He said that he had run well ahead of McGovern and that Nixon had almost carried his district, but he said that all Democrats in the city ran ahead of McGovern--that people had left the party for the Presidency and had come back to the party for Congress.

9B. He puzzled over this one and said something to the effect that "If you mean that I have tried to save the Armenians and have gained the support of the Armenians, yes I have. Actually I've offended more groups than I've picked up. But I have strengthened myself with groups on ethnic, foreign policy and economic issues."

During the anti-war period, I was way out in front on that issue. I werganized and I was the speaker at rallies where there were 2,000 and 3,000 people. During those years I had large forums. I had large meetings of senior citizens too--1500 or more. This year, I decided to go back to the neighborhood and to forego these large meetings. Why didn't I continue to relate to large groups and why did I want to go back to smaller groups? It was because I didn't see any clearly coalesced large constituency that needed massaging or any large issue that I wanted to push." I asked him if Forest Hills was the catalyst in making this change. He said no, but he said that Forest Hills is "still a thorny and provocative issue."

12. He said he thought "not many" people knew about his voting record. "They have a sense of a person's record--that I am a progressive Democrat". "I am one of eight who got 100% from the environmental groups;

I was one of twenty who had 100% from the ADA. People see these articles and they <sup>have</sup> believe more of an impression than anything else."

I started in asking question 15 and he called it "the Edmond Burke question" and said that "he didn't have a great deal of conflict but we then talked some more about it later on and it turned out that he did. He used the issue of busing and said that the majority of his district were opposed to busing and that he expected his opponent would mention the busing votes as a case where he went against the district.

16. I asked him about the problem of his strong supporters and he said he had no problem with them either and he gave an example of what he meant by his strongest supporters. He said "The most exquisite case I can give you was in the very early war years. There I had very strong support from the anti-war people. They were my strongest supporters and they made up about 5% of the district."

19. This question actually shed light on a lot of the previous question as he moved along. I asked him about trust. "It's accumulative thing--a totality thing." And he mentioned the service, the mail, the issues and so forth.

"People think I'm a pretty decent straight guy who generally represents their interests. You can find elements who think I'm an SOB. This opposition group is getting larger in numbers. It is not threatening, but it is larger. You have to understand things that have been happening in New York City. The Jews are more threatened and have gotten up tighter, trying to preserve their last neighborhood. Guys like me who want to keep open conduits to other communities are regarded as only 90% loyal,



not 100% loyal. Mike Goldenthal went to a meeting the other night and they said that 90 people wanted to run against me. A couple of rabbis were quite nasty to me. But they are still afraid of me. I'm a man who can call up Henry Kissinger. "I talk with the Israeli Ambassador. I'm important on issues of importance to their constituents but they perceive me as not standing tight enough shoulder-to-shoulder on the barricades. My greatest loss is there. The Greeks are stable. The conservative Catholics, I never had. But my 99.9% support from the Jewish community has dropped to maybe 80% or 75% of the Jewish community. Some of them would welcome a viable alternative. It is a very distressing and painful experience for me, because I understand exactly how they feel. Forest Hills crystallized the dilemma."

As a way of getting at the very last question in the interview, I asked him this time whether or not his seniority in the Congress was making it more difficult to hang on in the district or tend to district matters. And he answered first, "Do you mean, am I getting Potomac fever? The answer is, no."

"If you mean has the change in my official duties here made me a better Congressman, the answer is yes. If you mean has it taken away from my activity in the constituency, the answer is no."

He went into the matter of life style. "If there is a meeting of 23 people on a Sunday afternoon and they ask me to come, I won't go. My life style won't permit it. No matter how you look at it, being a Congressman is disastrous from your family life. At best, I'm away

from home 85 to 100 nights a year. Eighty nights a year! Why you and I know many people who have not spent one year, one night away from home in twenty years of married life. I try to make the best of it, but at the best, it is a bad scene." (He spoke here about how he tries to protect his family life, He spoke about someone in New York who had a rule that he wouldn't do any political work on Sunday and said he was not that bad but he tried to keep Sunday's free. He said he would not go home two weeks in a row. He talked about the comments by Senator Javits' wife in the morning paper, and said he didn't want anything like that. That he had decided not to have that kind of life. He said that Lester Holtzman said that he wishes that he had done what Ben had done, that he would have been a better father had he moved his family to Washington, and so forth.)'

"A few times I have gone back for one meeting and it has been a mistake. I remember one American Jewish Congress meeting in Manhattan. I thought I had to go to. It cost me \$52 and it was silly."

The Veterans' groups have a legislative breakfast once or twice a year. I don't go to them. If my family lived in the district, I still wouldn't go. They are another one of the groups I don't get along with very well. You aren't going to go back there and say I'm ripe for the plucking, are you? I don't think I am. But when you get these invitations you have to computerize the cost benefit ratio. Why should I go to one of the veteran's meetings? To begin with, they aren't for me anyway. And out of the 40 there, only two of them will be from my

district. The American Legion, the VFW...I haven't been to their meetings in five years. I remember I did go to a Jewish War Veterans' meeting in the new part of my district; but that's because they were in the new part of the district and I was trying to work the new part more heavily."

"Another thing, these groups will chew you up if you let them. You are free entertainment for them. If the master of ceremonies gets you, it's a freebee for them. And they'll do it if you let them. Another thing, I think the office of Congressman has more prestige than that of a State Assemblyman. I don't think I have to be at every meeting where a State Assemblyman has to be. A lot of people differ with me on that. The people of Queen's think you ought to be there--except for me. I think I'm educating them. I try to pick my spots--to find speaking engagements where I can do the most good."

"Koch sits in his district office all day waiting for constituents. I couldn't do that for ten minutes. I'd crack up." Then he talked about how good a caseworker his new girl in the district is.