

Wyche Fowler

Allan Secrest - December 15, 1992

- He kept me waiting, as usual; and when I finally got in, he was, as usual, full of himself.
- I said, "This wasn't the meeting I thought we would have when I last talked to you." He said, "You weren't surprised were you, after what I said last time?" I said that he had been equivocal last time; and he said something to indicate that WF had kept him on a fairly tight leash, that he had been afraid to say too much, but had hinted that Wyche was in trouble.
- "Wyche gave it away. He deserved to lose. There is nothing personal about it. He deserved to lose."
- "He was a different candidate in 1992 than he was in 1986. In 1986, he was sincere, attentive, hungry. In 1992, he was aloof, imperial, condescending. In 1986, he listened and worked the state. In 1992, he did not take advice to work the vineyards."
- "He gave his staff miniscule amounts of time to schedule him in Georgia; from his second to his fourth and fifth year, he gave insufficient time to Georgia." *for information to 1st page of interview*
- "With Sam Nunn, you know he's interested in defense and you know the values that flow from that interest. But Wyche Fowler--who is he, where has he been, what are his accomplishments? People don't care about him being Mitchell's aide."
- "There was a vacuum that attended the senator's profile on the performance dimension."
- "In polling, the best predictor of vote share is job rating. Wyche's languished and had been for four years."
- He has a picture of Georgia as the last of the contiguous states to get hit by the Republican right wing tide--speaks of Georgia as an "economic rock," "an island of Democratic hegemony," and that it "changed slowly." He said something to the effect that "into the vacuum caused by the anti-incumbent mood came" (PC?).
- He said there were "elements of the context" that mattered--especially the changed electorate "younger, less black, more white."
- But "80% of the blame is at Wyche's feet. He was more interested in the pitching rotation of the Atlanta Braves."
- "He'll tell you that he never pays any attention to polls. That isn't entirely true; but there's a lot of truth to it. I'm sure he never reads any of our polls from cover to cover. He didn't pay attention to our warnings. If there is a motto for the campaign, it should be

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'Attention must be paid.'"

- Then he read from the sheets of poll summaries. He gave them to me after I asked him to, having said it was for internal consumption.
- After he finished reading, he took up the idea that he had wanted WF to start earlier with negative ads--as soon as PC got nominated. "We waited and waited and waited. We saw the whites of their eyes; we saw their tonsils. Still we did not go on the attack."
- "All the pundits who think they know something about elections--the Cook Report, the Atlanta Constitution, the Democratic Senatorial Committee--said (in September) that Fowler had a huge lopsided lead of 50-32. I said at the time we were in a tight game. All that matters is where the incumbent is with respect to 50%, because the challenger will get all the undecideds. We did five polls in October and Wyche never got above 50%."
- He went through, again, what he said last time that when challengers win, they think they got a mandate, when in fact the incumbent was fired and the challenger has to make a reputation from scratch. It's a nice point; but I think he covered it well in the last interview.
- He went through, again, the fact that his firm handles more Democratic candidates than any other pollster, that he won 22 of 25 incumbent races, four of six challengers, and 10 of 12 open seats. (Or thereabouts.) He earlier told me that he billed the WF campaign for \$280,000 and the Georgia State Committee for \$72,000 for GOTV. Was upset, he said, not about WF loss personally, but upset because he had a lot of business in Georgia and was afraid the loss would hurt his business.
- After all that he said, "we don't coddle candidates"--with the clear indication that he wasn't about to babysit this difficult senator.
- "A successful campaign has the discipline of a campaign." (And WF's didn't.)
- "You can compare the Fowler campaign with the Bush campaign. They were very similar. They both thought they were above it. They didn't believe their support was hemorrhaging. They both wasted 3-1/2 to 4 years and left themselves without a safety net."
- He said that on the run-off, they were not out-spent or out-stripped organizationally, they got their vote out. WF got 49% both times. Turnout of nearly 40% was above estimates of Max Cleland.
- In 1986, blacks made up 20%-21% of electorate; this time 17%.
- "The bottom line is that you've got to want the job and you've got to fight for it." (W didn't.)
- "For three years, I got phone calls telling me that 'Wyche went to

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→ Georgia and pissed people off again. Wyche went to the Kiwanis Club in Savannah and pissed everyone off."

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- He told a story which obviously rankled about a quote of his that appeared in a Mark Sherman article sometime in 1991. Wyche told Secrest never to speak to the press again, that he, Wyche, had a rule that his consultants should never speak to the media. Secrest said he wouldn't do it again, but noted to me that he had tons of clients and had never been dressed down like that. It frayed their personal relationships, which were never very good. Secrest worked through Bill. Hardly ever saw Wyche personally. He used the story to indicate Wyche's cantankerous nature and difficulty as a candidate. Later in the interview he said, "He was who he was. I got that phone call. That's the way it was."

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- He said that Wyche had an "ongoing and relentless feud with Mark Sherman," and that it hurt incrementally. He didn't say why, but I gathered it was the big disjuncture that it brought between free and paid media.

- The context of the campaign, late in the day, was that "we couldn't buy it. Wyche hadn't given us anything to work with."

- Four days before the election on Nov. 3, "we brought home the blacks south of Atlanta and we went from 46% to 49% in four days."

- "We didn't lose because he swung at Coverdell or because of Tom Perdue's masterstroke of a lady singing jingles."

- "In 1986, we knew what to do: an older electorate, social security, the populist campaign. Mattingly stayed on the absenteeism theme too long. If he'd gone with ideology from the beginning, he'd still be in the Senate."

- He spoke of 1992 as a younger electorate. "Wyche did very poorly among the 18-24 y/o white voters. They hated Fowler. Of course, most of them were Republicans."

→ - He also zeroed in on white voters in North Georgia and Augusta. Spoke of those two areas as "hemorrhaging."

- He buttressed his case about Wyche by citing the Nov. 3 results in the "fringe markets" i.e., Jacksonville, Greenville, Chatanooga. The overall result was 49-48-3 (for Fowler). But in fringe markets, it was 51-46-3 (for Coverdell). He said they were not out-spent in those markets, that their media was just as strong as PC's. But people didn't know anything about Fowler there. That Fowler had not made himself visible there. That begs the question of Coverdell's ads--but the question is: why did PC's ads do so much better in the fringe markets, given that they weren't shown any more often? For Secrest, Wyche's poor showing is due to his lack of attention.

- I began to push him on my idea of the alternate "Georgia First" theme.

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I do not think he ever answered my idea or coped with it. He had fairly long pauses (unheard of for him) and admitted at a couple of points that he couldn't answer me, but he kept trying anyway. He never acknowledged giving any ground; but I came away more than ever convinced that WF had a viable strategy and that they did not give it to him. I believe that his consultants failed him--not that they would have done it--given Wyche's attitude; but he could have put his best foot forward better than he did. I think it's an argument for new, small firms, not the biggest ones. Greer had Clinton; Secrest had more Dem accounts than any other pollster. WF got lost.

- a 4 yr
problem
- I asked what campaign theme was. "We couldn't get him to adopt a thematic focus. (By January (?), it was too late to implant an image.) We knew it would have to be a negative campaign against Coverdell. When you are in office five years and you are just as much of a cipher as you were at the beginning, you can't do much." (Of a positive nature, he meant.)
 - He admitted he didn't like "the insipid ads that had Wyche talking about health and education." Or, "the drift in message (conveyed in ads) was inexcusable."
 - He said Kim Haddow "cut her teeth on the Fowler campaign," that she would be very good in the future, but that Kim did not do the best job that could have been done. He said later, in response to a direct question by me that Greer might have goosed Wyche a little more to make him go negative earlier.
 - Secrest expressed the view a couple of times that if they'd gone negative earlier, they would have gotten the 30,000 votes they needed. Especially Secrest wanted to run the crime spot before Nov. 3. He said that both WF and Kim were "reluctant." It's not clear who was face-to-face with WF for that decision.
 - "One way to look at it is that in every region Wyche won 51% of the vote except in North Georgia where he lost 46-44." (Nov. 3) (Or maybe he said "won 44%.")
 - On my idea that they should have emphasized that WF was "in touch," he kept saying, "Wyche didn't sell the idea that he was in touch. The ground work had not been laid for that theme, the infrastructure was not there. You can't leave all the salesmanship till the last year."
 - Of course, he didn't think WF travelled enough in Georgia.
 - He added, "His issues--health, education--weren't sufficient to hold the line."
 - And, "His ads didn't feel like they did in 1986."
 - And, "He didn't treat people as well as he did in 1986. A lot of his efforts were incomplete."

- I argued, and did argue to him that the "Georgia First, town meetings, bring home the bacon," was all you had. He had no answer for that. (It will make a nice contrast to DP)
- Re his votes, "None of them made any appreciable difference. His Clarence Thomas vote depressed the enthusiasm of some supporters. But that could have been mitigated if he had mended fences. He didn't do that till the run-off." I think maybe Wyche didn't mend fences earlier because he wants to stay unencumbered. He wanted them to wake up to their own interests and come to him. They did; but too late. A price for being "his own man."
- I asked him to pinpoint key decisions. "Once we got to September the questions were about sequence. What order should we use (with ads) and should we cut new ones. We have to give serial advice."
- Last couple of weeks before Nov. 3 re crime spot decision, "We had two targets: older voters and down-scale whites. The question was how to coalesce them at that point. The window had closed on a pro-Fowler message."
- I asked him when that "window" had closed, so that "go negative" was the only strategy left. He said, "early October--maybe earlier. After that, the voters did not want to listen to Fowler's accomplishments."
- "The race did not turn on ideology. It didn't develop that way." (Maybe not, but it was a background fact--that W is too liberal for Georgia.)
- "He had committed the unpardonable sin. He had 'gone Washington' and he could not recover. (Why?) I don't know. I guess he read his press clippings."
- He said he and Greer disagreed about the message for the run-off. He didn't make it clear what he wanted, but he tried to say that he thought a pro-Georgia message of the sort Nunn delivered was the answer. (That would have been my choice all the way.) That he should have been arguing seriously for it for Nov. 24--when he rejected it for Nov. 3rd--is not credible. Anyway, he said that he never thought the "I'll help Bill Clinton end the gridlock" theme was any good; but Greer did. My observation is that good or bad, it was the first time Wyche had a theme--which is why I was so disappointed when he did not hammer it home in his closing statement in the debate.
- Secrest talked about how PC got better in the debates--started by not looking at WF, ended by wheeling around and looking him in the eye. Secrest and I agreed that Wyche couldn't imagine that a guy like Coverdell could beat him and got frustrated in last debate.
- I asked S if he thought WF thought he would win. He did think that, as I did.
- He told me to compare 1992 with the 1990 Zell Miller for Governor

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campaign, in which Miller "had a disciplined message." I don't think we have to go to 1990. PC, in 1992, had a very disciplined campaign.

- "It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the lack of a foundation, of the inability to build an edifice that would endure."
- We talked about Sam Nunn and the problem of living with Nunn and building something in the face of Nunn. "No one took more pleasure in Wyche Fowler's struggles than Sam Nunn." Said it was better with Bob Hurt than it used to be (new AA).
- I asked Secrest whether he ever used "cares about people like me" question? He said he did--and there is evidence that he did in the pages of comments from his reports. But he said in general that Wyche was not very high on that. The one comment in the report says that he's slipping on that count. I still say it's all they had and they should not have missed it. Bill sort of admits it; but he takes all the blame for everything--it's his nature. But the others do not admit it--it isn't their nature.