

Wyche Fowler

Bill Johnstone - December 8, 1992

- I talked with Bill amid the cartons and debris of the conference room. The office was a mess and our talk was punctuated by drilling from the floor above. The women in the office were calling and gossiping about jobs; Wyche was down in Atlanta helping the staff there; Bill was looking forward to two weeks in Puerto Rico. Nothing had been settled by way of jobs for staff or Bill or Wyche. Everything smacked of chaos and transition--destination unknown. Bill was more candid and relaxed (relieved?) than ever and we talked for a couple of hours.
- I asked him if he had talked to anyone about the election. He said he had done so for the first time the previous evening--to Cathy Rudder. (Since Cathy and I are having dinner next week, the Fowler adventure has come full circle. Back to Cathy--where it all began.)
- He talked some about staff jobs--that their situation would be better in DC than Atlanta. Martha Pope, Mitchell's former AA, is now the Sergeant at Arms of the Senate, and she promised Wyche that his staff could have temporary jobs in the Senate till they found something. A favor to Wyche which derives from his relations with Mitchell. He talked, also about his own living in stress over the last three months. Relieved to get out of that.
- He talked about what he called "the environment" of the campaign first--the demographics and vote patterns.
- "The most important change element affecting the campaign was the increase in the whiteness of the electorate in the last six years. We did better this time with the blacks and just as well, if not better with the whites as we did in 1986. We got 88% of the blacks in 1986 and 92% this year. We got 40% of the whites in 1986 and 41% or 42% this year--but there are so many more of them this year. The Democrats have been over-taken by the sheer demographics. The black electorate is younger than the white electorate, but the in-migration of whites has offset the maturation of young blacks. Black registration reached its peak in 1988 and reached its peak vote in 1988--with Jesse Jackson on the (primary) ticket. No one in the pitiful, disgraceful Atlanta press picked up this huge change in the political environment. Not even Merle Black or Charles Bullock called our attention to it."
- "Overall, Nov. 3 was not good for the Democrats. Even in the presidential race, you got only 44% for a two-southerner ticket against an unpopular President. The Republicans won several close races and nearly won a couple of others. The Governor's number one priority, the lottery, just squeaked by."
- "I thought in the beginning that the lottery would be helpful to us. (On Nov. 3.) Afterward, we found out it was not. In northern Georgia, turnout increased. People went out to vote against the lottery and stayed to vote against Fowler."

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- He talked about other sections of the state. Did better than 1986 in the suburbs, but there were more people in the suburbs (the whiteness increase again). Down in Fulton--to be expected, since it was Coverdell's base, too, and had not been Mattingly's. He mentioned Cherokee County as one of the fastest growing in USA and said they did well with people who were there in 1986, but they were swamped by newcomers.
- He distinguished between the Nov. 3 and Nov. 24 elections and said he had been talking about Nov. 3. He spoke of the fall-off between the two and noted that the turnout was greater than anyone predicted.
- "Our problem was more message than organization. Money and organization are not high on the list of problems we had on Nov. 3." [Had no message and didn't stay "on message."]
- Then he went on to discuss a problem of organization they did have on Nov. 24--the poor state of the Democrat's "voter history file." He said it didn't affect Nov. 3 turnout, since the Senate race did not turnout voters on Nov. 3. Senate race turnout ran behind the presidential, congressional and lottery turnouts. But it did affect the Nov. 24 turnout, he thought.
- "The Democrats Georgia file was a disappointment, to me and to the state party chiefs. It was not in good shape. Its phone lists were out of date and we struggled with them on the 24th. In a low turnout election, an accurate voter file enables you to get your vote out. We knew the conversion rate would be extremely small for both candidates. Our own voter histories were pretty good for the urban and suburban area. We called virtually every black home in those areas. And we had the money to contact every black home throughout the state--whenever we had racial information. But with white voters in the rural areas, we were at a disadvantage. There, we were strictly scattershot. These votes only made up 10-11% of the state, but the Republicans had kept up there files in these areas. We were unable to produce voter histories in three weeks. As a result, more of our voters 'stayed home on the 24th.' That helps explain why we fell off more than the Republicans did in those areas. There were 100 counties we were unable to target for getting out the vote."
- "On Nov. 3, we were disappointed by our showing in North Georgia. We ran ahead of 1986 in South and Central Georgia and in the urban areas."
- He then started comparing '86 and '92 by media markets--better in Columbus, Macon and Albany markets. That's why they asked Clinton to go to those cities. Savannah was a disappointment. It was Mattingly's base in 1986, so they thought they would do better. Blacks not energized there. His theory in Savannah and Augusta--both of which WF carried, but not by enough--was this: both cities were adjacent to black districts newly drawn. Those races were cancelled and neglected by Republicans who put all their energies into white on white races in the area. The whites came out to vote and blacks were less stimulated

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since their races were not hotly contested.

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- "On the 24th, the worst was our horrendous showing in the Chatanooga media market. It's only 5% of the state, but it was critical and it fell through the floor."
  - He said they did ok in the "five county metro area," and that they improved on the 24th in Cherokee, Douglas, Walton because "young voters dropped out."
  - After all this hopscotching around the voting results, he said again that there were environmental factors and he concluded: "We did not do quite as horrendous a job as it would seem without taking the environment into account. I feel worse about the 3rd. I think we did about as well as we could on the 24th."
  - "The pitiful reporters missed entirely the potential trouble we were in because of the environment. They portrayed Nov. 3 as shocking."
  - In the middle of this recitation, I had asked Bill about the war vote, was it a factor? Did PC press him hard on it? "In his standard stump speech on the campaign trail, Coverdell would mention Fowler's war vote as part of his litany. But he never gave it any special emphasis. It got no play at all in the free media. The fact that Coverdell did not mention it in his paid media shows you how important it was to him. It was not anywhere near the top 10 of things that affected the outcome."
  - Along the way, he characterized the PC campaign as "a campaign to destroy Wyche Fowler's reputation for honesty and integrity." And he added, "That's all there was to it. He had no program; and he goes to the Senate without any mandate." Discussed PC's "lead or leave pledge, term limits," all undercutting himself.
  - He talked some about the degree to which negative campaigning had rendered campaigns less and less related to governing.
  - He talked some, also at the beginning of our talk, about the court suit that's going forward about the illegality of NRSC money. He knows it will have no affect on the outcome of the race (and wishes some staff members were not hoping otherwise), but he hopes that a stiff fine for "breaking the law" will help the system and spur reform.
  - Of the "campaign-related" things, the most important, he said was, "We didn't develop an adequate positive theme for the campaign. It was a blur in people's minds. The free media was so bad that it was totally irrelevant--not in the top 10 of things that affected the race. The paid media was the main arena of conflict. We struggled to find a message. Our positive message--on health, education--tested well in focus groups. When they were uncontested by his attack ads, they did well. But people couldn't identify him with anything. His trio program, his historic preservation bill were significant accomplishments for a freshman, but we were not able to find anything like Harris Wofford on health, or Zell Miller on the lottery. As individual items,

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our positive spots were effective; but we had no overall theme."

- "We did not respond in a timely fashion to Coverdell's attacks. We were a divided council on what he would do and when. He did not go on the air until four weeks before the election. We went on eight weeks before the election, which gave us four uncontested weeks. (He says PC went on briefly before that; Kim says no.) Three of us (Greer, Secrest, Johnstone) were convinced we were in danger--regardless of the polls--because of Wyche's tenuous hold on the public in terms of his approval rating. Coverdell went on the air with his first big time attack ad just before and just after the Channel 2 debate. It was a failure of our media buy that they could hammock their 'hand on the Bible, bounced checks' ad that effectively."
- "We knew they would do something on the bounced checks problem. We knew they couldn't prove he did it and that we couldn't prove he didn't. We were faced with a choice. We could put on the positive 'Mamma' ad (which had done well) to inoculate him against the charge and then say that he had not bounced checks. Or we could attack Coverdell on the ground that the free media can't prove he did bounce checks. We decided we could change the dialogue if we continued to run a positive spot and along side of it to carry a negative spot. Our crime spot had tested best among our negative spots. But we decided to go with a milder negative spot--the one on his Peace Corps record. It had also tested well and could be authenticated by the Inspector General's report. We also held a press conference at which Wyche disclosed his bank records and financial records. Most of the reporters who came were B grade reporters who had no idea of what was going on and were of no help. It was a critical juncture. We were still up by 15 points, but our positive/negative ratio was worsening. We saw his very negative spot (which he ran to the end of the run-off campaign) and we saw his media buys going up to the point where they were almost equalling ours. It was just the reverse of 1986; we had been on the upswing then and we knew how it felt. Our decision was to stay positive but to begin to go negative. It is of passing interest to note that we had long since decided that we would not be the first to go negative. There is a high probability that had we not had that principle, we could have done him substantial early damage from which he could not have recovered. I say that from a cold-hearted perspective. And only as a passing interest since neither Wyche nor I would ever have altered that decision."
- "As to the end game, we did a poll about 10 days out from the election. We had been worried about the Hudson factor from the start. I thought he would get 7%. But I never thought until that last poll that PC would ever run close to us. He had always run well under 50% in the polls and I thought he had little personal appeal. We faced another juncture. Coverdell had begun running his second negative attack ad--the two faces of Wyche Fowler. It was full of distortion. But Greer thought it would be devastating to us and he wanted to hit back with a response ad. Secrest wanted us to go with our crime spot. A crime mailing of ours had caused Coverdell to go ballistic. It made Merle Black ask why someone who was so far ahead would go so negative. Secrest wanted the crime spot. Wyche had qualms about it and I did too. Did we really

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thru → want to engage in it. I thought it was out of context for the election. It had been done as a counter to a possible death penalty ad we had been expecting. We wondered how it would fit into the truth and honesty referendum the Republicans were trying to run on Wyche. Our decision was that neither the Secrest crime spot nor the Greer response should prevail. My own feeling was that the scripts of the Greer folks were not adequate. And I did not think PC had fired his final gun. My position prevailed. But in retrospect, it was a significant mistake. Partly it was a miscalculation about what Coverdell would do. He did not come out with a new ad. I would do it differently now."

- "Our last poll was taken five days out--on Thursday before the election. It showed substantial deterioration in our position. We were now in the mid-forties in a three-way race. We knew we were headed for a run-off and in bad shape. Alan wanted to go heavily with our crime spot. Instead, we went with a Greer response ad, using editorial comment to back-up our response to Coverdell's lies. It was conceived and done on Friday. Greer did a great job and did it without Wyche's approval. (Off-the-record: Wyche was unavailable and couldn't be reached.) He had to send it by satellite and we managed to get it on in a few places Saturday. But it did not go on in a major way until Monday evening. There is some suggestion in our post-election polls that without that ad, things might have been much worse. Wyche got a majority of the very late deciders. Had we put the response ad on earlier, it could have made a big difference. As it turned out, the 'two faces of WF' was the last Coverdell ad. He ran that ad in tandem with the 'hands on the Bible' ad to the end. We never needed the response ad I assumed we would. My decision not to go with the response ad earlier was the single biggest mistake I made."
- "In 1991, we tested two themes here in the office and wrote a stump speech for each one. One was that WF was accessible, and he got things done for Georgia. That was Carville's advice to us, that we go with that theme. The other was that Wyche was an agent of change in fields like health care and education. We had an inability to agree on either one or on any other message. Both tested well. We even tried a draft that blended the two. Wyche had a speech and all the data available to him at an early date if he had chosen the Georgia-first theme. But neither stump speech or message was ever approved by Wyche or used by him."
- [There was a lot of off-the-record talk of the difficulty of dealing with Wyche during the campaign.]
- They had trouble arranging a kick-off for the campaign. "He didn't want to start his campaign, so he was reluctant to do a kick-off in the first place. We wanted to do a set of kick-off interviews by satellite to all parts of the state. He cancelled that at the last minute and did a few satellite interviews, but without ever saying why he was running (I went to those). After that, he went with the Governor to do a kick-off speech. We had given him revised draft #4 of his stump speech. He never used it. And I want to forget all those stump speeches we wrote. Zell Miller gave the pro-Georgia speech for him, at a senior citizens

as impassioned and wonderful. Wyche's remarks were a r-telling discourse with no apparent focus. He talked up in front of him--some about social security--without a larger audience that might be watching."

er had a theme or a message, he was much more defenseless as came. He was pretty nearly a blank slate. We didn't te on Wyche's behalf."

s media is non-existent. It is all murder and mayhem. e race. But Sherman's stories on the campaign were on page four of the local section between a robbery and a And there is no time on the television for any policy e was virtually no air time in Atlanta given to Wyche's vation efforts. He worked on it for five years and 80% signed was Wyche's bill. It was widely hailed by s. He got a little play in Savannah where some of the are interested in restoration. Otherwise, no one ever

The same treatment extended across other issues. The s never took an interest in anything Wyche was pushing. of media stories on Wyche. They were all reactive--what f some foreign policy event. Nothing we tried to get on t on. And this is irrespective of Wyche's temperament. that policy is not newsworthy."

of the campaign was not decisive for either campaign--he l times that free media was way back on the list of

d adopted a "passive media strategy" (early on, I think) dn't want to attack PC. But he said, in retrospect, they cked him more actively.

Sherman's reporting was "psychologically harmful" to the campaign, even if he wasn't objectively very important. to tell the campaign staff not to get so excited about ted at some point that Sherman's stories were always in the local section. [Kim gives the free media a much n Bill does--because she sees the free media in relation ia--a big factor for her.]

they didn't bring a press secretary to the campaign to October. Said that Wyche only wanted Bill to talk to

hen I raised the point, that the free media was very Coverdell and his people. So I guess his ultimate view dia was probably that it did have influence. Maybe his only Sherman had little influence. A dubious point.

e never out-spent on paid media," even when PC came very at seemed to be a matter of pride for him. That's not hey and media seemed to be his twin obsessions--at least

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whenever I saw him they were. He thinks--but too hard to track--that PC used radio extensively.

- He ended up saying that any Republican could have won, that the future does not look good for the Democrats in Georgia. Said he certainly would not advise WF to run again.
- The timing of Charles Weltner's illness (which Bill and I discussed off-the-record) was that about two years ago--after some wedding that he and WF attended and at which CW was in fine shape--he got hit with cancer. Bill felt that Wyche devoted his last two years to making sure Weltner was taken care of. He went with him to Iraq "the trip that got him in so much trouble. The trip to the middle east increased my admiration for him as a human being, but politically it cut the heart out of our plan to have him all over the state. When we had to make campaign decisions--about fund-raising and scheduling--he was in Turkey."
- Re Wyche having no record, Bill said over and over, "he was a blank slate."