

Atlanta Trip - October 17-21, 1992

Bill Johnstone - October 19, 1992

- (M) - I talked to Bill on Monday. His first question to me was: "What did you think of this morning's story?" I said it was one of the worst jobs of reporting I'd seen, that it didn't bear any relation to what I saw. He nodded and said that was the trouble they were having with Sherman--that he and Wyche really did not get along or words to that effect.
- (M) - Dennis suggested that the tone of Sherman's articles changed after the great blow-up, and that Sherman is angry because he did not get credit for the story--even though he did not deserve the credit, since it was a tipster that gave it to him. Dennis also says he is certain that Sherman is "sitting on an anti-Coverdell story and has been sitting on it for weeks." The idea is he won't release it to help Fowler. I think the Fowler people believe that the editor squashed the original Sherman story or someone did, since it appeared in the gossip column and didn't surface till a week after I left. The bank issue is one of PC's best issues, however, and has tried hard to keep it alive.
- When I went into Bill's office, he was printing out the poll results and the advertising buys for me; and he gave me a lot of data--including a focus group summary involving several ads.
- I asked him just what it was that worried him at this point in the campaign. He pointed to the decline in favorability numbers in their most recent polls--that is, the decline between October 5 and October 11. Those numbers in the last two columns worry me (job approval). "There is no real reason, no apparent reason, in the light of what has been happening, why those numbers should have declined. It's the trend that bothers me, because there is no obvious explanation for such a significant decline. Not all of it is statistically significant, but some of it is. As you can see, during that same period, we have been on TV twice as much or more than he has. We have double the number of gross rating points. And the ad he has been playing for most of that time has been the old lady ad, which our focus group tell us is just not appealing to people. Clinton's polls taken during the same week, show the same trend for us from plus five to plus 13, our head-to-head numbers have been going down from 25-21, and job performance down by nine. I don't understand why it should be happening."
- "Right now, I'm waiting for our new poll numbers. Secrest will give us some idea in a couple of hours. I expect them to decline, but I hope not by much. If they show a 10 point spread, I will be very perturbed. If they are in the high teens, I'll be relieved."
- (A) - "Wyche was very reluctant to go negative with the Peace Corps ad. For five weeks, we had been going only with positive ads. But they had produced no real gain. So I concluded we had gone about as far as we could go in making people like Wyche. Coverdell has never had a negative spot run against him. There were none in the Republican primary. We finally persuaded Wyche that he had gone as far as he could

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go. So far, the only negative we have run is the Peace Corps ad. It's been on for a week, and 900 gross rating points two to one over his buy. We won't know how effective it is till we get the poll results. I don't want it to run for more than two weeks. That means we have some big decisions to make tomorrow evening."

- "I'm not saying that we're losing or anything like that. No one ever thought Wyche was going to win by 20 points. But I do want the race to flatten out pretty soon. Until it does, I'll be nervous. There's a worrisome similarity to 1986. We were 20 points behind against an incumbent and caught him."
- "On top of the decline in the polls, our fund-raising is not what we had hoped. In October of 1986--of course the situation was very different because a lot of people had held back money to see if we had a chance--we collected \$600,000. So far, this October we have collected only \$100,000. To make it worse, the Senate Campaign Committee reneged on the deal we made that if we raised \$100,000 for them, they would give it back to us later. Now they refuse to do it, saying that others need our money more than we do. They have every right to set the rules, but they are changing the rules two weeks out (from this election). That's pretty bad. And they are stonewalling us. We can't even reach them to talk about it."
- "The long and short of it is that we are in a resource quandry. Our finances are not what we had hoped. And we have to worry about a possible outcome that would mean financing three more weeks for a runoff primary."
- "The good news is that Coverdell is floundering on the money side. So far, he has been able to make only weekly buys--about half the gross rating points of our buys. This week, he has only bought for three days. And they are weak buys, because there is so little space left. It's very crowded now, with congressional candidates coming in. I think he's trying to reach some threshold that the Republican Campaign Committee has set, after which they will release some \$300,000 to him. If he gets this big infusion, that will produce a pretty good buy for the last week--not quite as big as ours, but better than any week he has had so far. That makes our decisions about the last week important." Anxiously awaiting PC's "big infusion."
- "We are all bought up through next Monday, the 26th. Tomorrow we have to make some major decisions about the last week. Despite the good and noble goal of Wyche Fowler--of ending the campaign with a surplus so that he wouldn't have to do any fund-raising for awhile--I think we will have to spend what we have, plus whatever he is getting in New York today and tomorrow. Even with that, I'm probably going to have to wipe out our final direct mail effort all together. We have to decide what spots to use and how negative they should be. I think we should go 50% positive and 50% negative. We have a tough, tight wire <sup>act</sup> here. We don't want to go so negative that people vote for Hudson and cause a runoff--which would be very much in doubt!" He described one spot as his ~~crise~~ <sup>crime</sup> record, one on his insurance record, plus a tax spot. He

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said some were ready and some "sketched out." I'm not sure which was which. The focus group report said that WF was not well known and, therefore, negatives alone won't do it. He still needs positive identification.

- The main explanation Bill offered for the dip in poll numbers was that Secrest told him he had observed the phenomenon elsewhere.
- "The only explanation I have is the overall anti-incumbent climate. The biggest thing Coverdell has going for him is his statement, 'I am not an incumbent.' He doesn't deliver it well, but it hurts us. Secrest says that he has seen the same dip with several incumbent House members. This just may be the point in the campaign where the anti-incumbent thing kicks in. For how long? That's what I want to know." (Then to flattening comment, I think.)
- On Tuesday, I talked again to Bill and picked up the focus group tapes. He gave me a copy of the direct mail item they might not be able to send out. It's a printed version of the TV ad attacking PC's Peace Corps management.
- "I want to keep this close to us because we might not be able to use it. If we do, we'll have to take money away from our TV outside of metro Atlanta. That's the only place we have any money. It's a trade-off."
- I asked him to whom they would send then, and he said "swing voters and independents."
- He also said with regard to the poll results, which so worried him yesterday. "They were all right--down, but only a little bit, three points. It's not as good as I'd like, but it's not disastrous just two weeks out. If it were five or six weeks out, I would be worried."
- When I asked him about his post-election plans, he said, "We might have a three week runoff. I'm not making any plans right now."

Some  
sense of  
contribution  
here