

Don Baker Recalls the 1994 Senate Race

Mariemont's Government classes recently viewed the film A Perfect Candidate, which covered the 1994 US Senate race in Virginia. The GOP nominated Lt. Col. Oliver North (of Iran-Contra fame) while the Democratic Party gave incumbent Chuck Robb the nod. Former Virginia Governor Doug Wilder, a lifelong Democrat and the nation's first African American governor, ran as an independent. Wilder dropped out and Robb won. After watching the film, students were left asking a few questions. Washington Post reporter Don Baker was kind enough to provide an inside look at the campaign, answering questions that came from the 12th grade students.

Government Perspectives: Doug Wilder certainly played a big role in this election. Having written a book on Governor Wilder, can you shed light on him? Why did he drop out of the race? How difficult was it for Wilder to endorse Chuck Robb?

Don Baker: Wilder is perhaps the most charismatic, controversial and intelligent public figure I have known (Ollie North qualifies on the first two of those counts). Btw, Wilder continues that way today, as the mayor of Richmond. He is driven by a sense of outrage of how he and other African-Americans have been treated over the years, and is easily incensed by affronts, perceived and real. I think he dropped out of the race because (A) he couldn't stand to lose, especially to Robb, and (B), he didn't want to be held responsible for the election of North. Wilder's endorsement of Robb was the single most insincere act I ever witnessed in politics, and that's saying a lot.

GP: Did you favor one candidate over the others?

Baker: My ballot, like yours, was and is secret. Journalists often "vote the story," which is to say they favor the candidate who would create the better story. In this instance, it surely would have been North. I think I indicated admiration for North early on because he was, at once, so outrageous and grounded in his beliefs. I later concluded that he also was/is pathological.

GP: How accurately did the film *A Perfect Candidate* portray the candidates, the campaign, and the press?

Baker: I think they scored A Perfect 10, which is why it such a compelling movie.

GP: Your description of Robb, and his success seems high. But most viewers ask, "How did this stiff, unpolished politician ever get elected in the first place, especially in a party he veers from?"

Baker: I covered Robb's successful run for governor of Virginia in 1981, in which he beat Marshall Coleman, who was a likeable, formidable opponent. Ironically, Robb then seemed to be "a perfect candidate" to many, including me. He was young, handsome, bright, honest, and, as the son-in-law of LBJ, had the star power to take him to the White House. He went on to be a good governor, appointing a then-record number of women and minorities, and pushing through a number of progressive proposals, especially in the field of education. During that time, Robb and fellow governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas helped start the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, which attempted to steer the party to a moderate course (so much so that Jesse Jackson

derided the DLC as “Democrats of the Leisure Class.) It was not until after Robb left the governor’s office that the “cracks in his armor,” to use his phrase, became visible. It later was revealed (partly by me) that as governor he fell into bad company, hanging out with drug dealers and prostitutes. I likened Robb to the kid in the candy store window, his nose pressed against the window, but afraid to go in. Eventually, however, he did go in, as witness his affair with beauty queen Tai Collins, who used the notoriety to become a Playmate centerfold.

Interestingly, years later Clinton used the Robb “defense,” both contending that as long as they stopped short of sexual intercourse (which Robb may have, but Clinton assuredly did not), they had not been unfaithful to their wives. After the revelations about Robb’s tryst, he became somewhat of a laughing stock. And for those of us who had bought into his early image, of, as I wrote, “a jut-jawed, milk-drinking combat marine and family man,” the disillusion was great.

GP: In all the campaigns you have covered, how does the ’94 Senate campaign measure up to others? What’s the most memorable campaign you have ever covered and why?

Baker: This one ranks at the top, along with Wilder’s historic 1989 election as governor (still the only African-American ever elected governor of an American state), and to a lesser extent, Ross Perot’s second try for president in 1996.

GP: Which candidate had the financial advantage? Can you recall by how much?

Baker: North raised more money, but his fund-raising expenses were so high that Robb was able to be competitive.

GP: Did you ever ask a question in order to “stir things up?”

Baker: Did I ever not? If reporters didn’t ask provocative questions, they would be reduced to being stenographers. Politicians don’t want questions; they just want to give answers.

GP: Did you learn any information about the candidates that you couldn’t, or wouldn’t, reveal during the race? If possible, can you reveal this now?

Baker: North told me several stories that were sounded patently untrue, but they either couldn’t be checked out, or weren’t worth it. But generally, if you hear it or see it, you write it.

GP: When asking Robb about his stand on Labor/Striker Replacements, were you trying to embarrass him, or did he do that himself?

Baker: I had tried before to elicit an answer from him on the subject and heard nothing but gobble-de-gook, so I thought I would try again. When I heard the same old stuff, I guess I did push the envelope to allow him to embarrass himself.

GP: Did the Iran-Contra scandal hurt or help North?

Baker: I think it helped him get the nomination, from the true believers, but in the end, I think it hurt.

GP: Do you find it difficult to keep your own opinions out of your reporting?

Baker: Not at all. I have often said that when you decide to be a journalist, you give up the right to yell “bullsh*t” in a crowded theater. If you can’t stay outwardly neutral, then follow your instincts and go to the stage, and yell as much as you please. Over the years I got along with politicians of all stripes. The challenge was not to be fair (that was easy), but to draw out answers that allowed the candidate/office holder to fairly express his or her opinions. One of my proudest achievements was receiving a telegram from the evangelist Jerry Falwell, who reluctantly sat down with me for an interview after he had been badly burned by another reporter (also from *The Post*). I told Falwell, as I often did when asked, that he might not like everything I write, because part of the job is going to critics/enemies to get their views, but that anything I wrote about him personally would be fair and accurate. His telegram said, “you are a man of your word.”

I must admit, however, that now that I am retired, I am enjoying the freedom to express my opinions, which are most in outrage these days.

GP: Which campaign, Robb’s or North’s, was more cooperative with you as a journalist?

Baker: North’s. They were cocky and quotable, as you could see in the movie. On a personal level, they were also more fun to go out with and have a brew, and that included Ollie. Like their candidate, the Robb folks were very uptight.

GP: Why did Robb win? Had the conservative independent Marshall Coleman dropped out, would that have changed the election?

Baker: North probably would have won. If Wilder had stayed in, North most certainly would have won.

GP: Why did Robb lose to Republican Senator George Allen (R) in 2000?

Baker: Conventional wisdom in 94 was that North was the only Republican that Robb could have beaten (and vice versa), so in 2000, Allen was not Robb.

GP: How would things have differed if Ollie North had won in 1994?

Baker: He would have been an immediate darling of the Far Right, though by 2000, I believe enough moderates would have been turned off by his extremism that he would not have been re-elected. He might not have won re-nomination by the GOP, and if he had, the Democrats might have won the seat, though probably not with Robb.