

Robert Reid

Report on Individual US Study Tour

11th October to 13th November 2000

Purpose:

To observe the 2000 US Presidential campaign, in particular, the campaign to elect Republican George Allen to the United States Senate.

Cities Visited:

Los Angeles (in transit); Washington DC; Richmond, Virginia; Atlantic City, New Jersey; New York, NY.

Report:

As the closeness of the 2000 US Presidential campaign demonstrated, campaigns matter more than ever

The major part of my trip was to observe the campaign for the right to represent Virginia in the United States Senate. George Allen, a former Republican Governor of Virginia was challenging Democrat Senator Chuck Robb. There was already a Republican Senator in the Senate representing Virginia (Senator John Warner) so it was always considered to be a difficult fight. Another high profile Republican, Ollie North, had already taken on Robb without success. It would have been the most important Senate race in the country if it had not been for the decision by Hilary Clinton to stand in New York, first against Mayor Rudy Guiliani and then, (when Guiliani pulled out because of prostate cancer) Rick Lazio.

Robb had come under attack over recent years as not representing Virginia well, as being too much from Washington and with apparently little to show for 12 years in the Senate with no Bills in his name. In hindsight, he had been significantly weakened by years of attack and by his increasingly Washington-focussed life and political views. In short, he had become Washington's man in Virginia (and perceived not to be a very good one) rather than Virginia's man in Washington.

Both candidates in 2000 were former Virginian Governors - however, the achievements of Governor Allen were fresher in the minds of voters. Allen had been able to spend the last two years on the road campaigning while Robb stayed in Washington. Robb had also failed to answer a number of colourful accusations made about his personal life, some of them involving a former Miss Virginia. A Vietnam veteran who married the daughter of President Lyndon Johnson, Robb was seen by some as a future Presidential nominee, a dream that had turned sour over recent years.

Allen portrayed himself as a family man, son of a well loved football coach and played down the fact the fact that he was originally from California. Allen was able to emphasise his easy-going nature and his 'common-sense' solutions across

the State. Tobacco chewing, football throwing with a relaxed, friendly nature, Allen was by far the more approachable candidate. Tough on drugs, tough on law and order, but promising to boost spending on health and education Allen seemed to be tailor made for Virginian politics. Everyone remarked on his cowboy boots. As he said to me! "I've only lost one election in my life and that was when I followed the advice of my campaign manager and didn't wear them. Never again!"

The Allen campaign portrayed Presidential candidate Al Gore and Robb together in a negative light. Election of either of them would see 'Bigger Government - More Federal Spending'. This, the Allen campaign successfully argued, meant "less money for you - more money for Government ". As a contrast, Allen's education tax plan would return money to voters, and used as his major campaign slogan, 'proven leadership, Virginia values'. Allen was able to capitalise on his record as Governor. Robb was unable to do the same with his record as Senator. Anytime his record was raised, it was as a negative.

To ensure that he did not alienate suburban families, especially those living in Virginia and commuting to work in Washington DC, Allen had to soften his stance on abortion and gun control. While accepting the support of the NRA, Allen's campaign made sure he was travelling elsewhere in the State when the NRA held public meetings in Virginia and when NRA chairman, Charlton Heston visited the State, Allen did not meet him. Allen also backed off on his previous opposition to a proposed ban on assault weapons and on the sensitive issue of abortion, called himself a "reasonable moderate".

Called by some "Virginia's Ronald Reagan", Allen has the same ability to wade into a crowd, shake hands and impress a great number of voters as an inspiring leader. To many, he was almost beyond party identification.

Robb, on the other hand, attracted small crowds, couldn't energise a dinner party let alone a crowd and seemed to be always on the defensive. Despite this weakness, Robb was coming back in the polls in the final two months. Six weeks out from election day, Robb was five points behind. Two weeks out, the candidates were neck and neck.

The four debates during the campaign had an important role in the eventual outcome. The first two debates were uneventful, except for some achromatic attacks on each other. However, with the football season still on and the campaign coming to a stop during the Olympic fortnight, it was not until the final debate, little more than a week out from election day, that many people began to focus on the choices they had and everybody seemed to watch the final debate.

For the Allen campaign, the highpoint of the final debate was the use of opportunity that each candidate had to ask a number of questions of each other. Allen asked Robb if he could tell the viewers of 2 or 3 Virginians who had inspired him during his years as a Senator or what he had been able to accomplish for them. Robb became flustered, was unable to name individuals and instead, spoke generally about programs he had helped establish.

This question by Allen (and the weak response by Robb) was then used by the Allen campaign during the final week. A "Real People in the Real World Tour" was organised, whereby Allen and up to 10 "average Virginians" toured the state by

air. At each stop, the "average Virginians" told a press conference how Allen had helped them when he was Governor and how his policies would help others if he was elected to the US Senate. For example, a teacher spoke about the improvement in state education under Allen, a sheriff spoke about law and order and a former prisoner spoke about the tightening of parole under Allen's administration. This person argued that if he had got out of gaol earlier, he would have reoffended. By having to serve his sentence without parole under Governor Allen's policies, he was given more time to see the errors of his ways. The tour was, judging by media coverage, a great success and helped many voters decide who to vote for.

Outcome

Senator Robb won most of the outer Washington suburbs, but not by the same margin he enjoyed in 1994 against Ollie North and not by the same margins required to offset Allen's strong vote in the rest of the State.

Also notable was Allen's ability to cut into Robb's previous solid support in the Black vote. Despite a desperate last ditch attempt by Robb and his supporters to paint Allen as a racist, Robb was not able to get a black protest vote based on fear going. This was despite dragging up ancient history, including Allen's use of a Confederate Flag and the hanging of a noose in his office when Governor. After the dust of election night had cleared, Robb had won just over 80 per cent of the Black vote, against an expected 90 per cent.

Overall, Allen's promotion of education and a tax rebate for parents buying books and computer equipment for their children, hiring additional teachers and renovating schools, along with his record of being tough on crime gave him overall support from parents.

Exit polling (conducted by the Allen campaign) showed married voters with children voted for him by 58 per cent to 42 per cent. All other voters split 50-50 per cent for Robb and Allen. Final figures showed Allen won 52.3 per cent of the vote, Robb 47.7 per cent. The Republicans now hold virtually all major elected positions.

Summary

It was extremely valuable to observe the 2000 US Presidential campaign by watching a close fought Senate campaign. I was given amazing access to the campaign itself and was based in the main Allen campaign office with regular visits to the other, mainly voluntary offices, where the bulk of workers were based.

The experience will be valuable - not just in any future campaign I might be involved in, but also in terms of political management techniques, especially with regard to media management, crisis response and the proper and efficient allocation of sometimes very tight resources.

The Allen campaign was not only well run (it had been running for two years prior to my arrival so I was observing a very smooth organisation) but it also efficiently used a mixed of paid and volunteer staff.

Areas of Major Interest

Campaign cost: The total cost of the Republican Senate campaign was \$9.7 million. The last reported costs of the Robb campaign was \$6.7 million. Denoting his status as a sitting Senator, Robb was able to raise a greater percentage of his money (24.1 per cent) from corporate donors than Allen (1.5 per cent). Allen raised most of his money from individuals, 80.2 per cent, compared to 64.7 per cent by Robb. Robb also contributed \$609,000 of his own money to the campaign. Allen did not contribute any of his own finances.

Debates: There were four debates held during the campaign (I was able to observe two) and both were important in helping determine the public feeling about the candidates. With both candidates already well-known, the debates were seen by campaign organisers as one of the few arenas able to show the difference between the candidates.

Polling: Used extensively by the Allen campaign to track the impact of announcements.

Organisation of Volunteers: Key factor in 'getting out the vote'. A very carefully structured system, based on precinct captains across the State.

Use of the Internet: The Internet played a key role in the campaign organisation. It was used to send out information to supporters and the press and provided an 'electronic face' to the campaign. While the internet did not chase votes, it remained a key part of the campaign. The Internet was used by all staff everyday of the campaign. The web site on Robb maintained by the Allen campaign was especially useful and allowed a running "reality check" accessible by all voters, and the media.

The Allen2000 web site sent daily emails to supporters, carried all press releases, photos of the campaign trail, biographical details on the candidate and his family as well as downloadable videos and campaign ads.

The web site was also used extensively for fund raising, as was E-mail. Some nights, after an E-mailed letter had been sent to supporters, upwards of \$30,000 was waiting by way of E-mails and credit card numbers in the morning.

Fund Raising: Watching the campaign raise funds was fascinating. Using mail, internet and telephone, targets were set and met. Overall, the Allen campaign raised \$9.9 million.

Other Areas of Interest

- Absentee Ballots
- Federal and State Laws regarding Political Contribution
- Finance and organisation of campaign
- Telephone campaigning (cold-calling)
- Precinct Organisation
- Preparation for election day