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American Twilight

A Memoir of Another War

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Chapter Five: Personal Politics

An Insurgent Campaign

The Democratic Leadership Council and Bill Clinton became the voice of the national Democratic Party, but not before fending off an unexpectedly strong challenge in 1992 by the Jerry Brown for President campaign. Having worked with Governor Brown earlier, I joined up with the national campaign and went about helping organize the national headquarters operations, as well as coordinating the campaign in New Mexico and assisting in Colorado. Most important to me were my efforts with Jerry to put together our campaign's platform.

The Brown campaign, which would finish a close second to Bill Clinton's "Comeback Kid" campaign, started on the steps of Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

Brown announced an “insurgent” campaign to “*Take Back America*.” The campaign’s message from the first speech had a steady beat – there had been “a hostile takeover” of American democracy by big money and corporate interests. It was a historic moment, an attempt to breathe new life into America’s democratic experiment. The speech set out a political landscape we were entering: “In reality there is only one party: It’s the Incumbent Party. There are, of course, two major political organizations with different names, but at their core they are the same. They share the same worldview and they serve the power of the same private interests which, in return, finance the campaigns of both. When there are no substantial differences, there is no choice to be made. Without choices, there is no democracy and when there is no democracy there is no freedom; only a system which entertains us with illusions.”

Governor Jerry Brown quoted Thomas Paine from the Revolutionary pamphlet *The Crisis*. “These are the times that try men’s souls.” He quoted General Washington and the ‘dark hour before the dawn’ when Washington’s winter soldiers rallied when faced with imminent defeat. “I run for President because I believe America is at a crossroads... For 200 hundred years, each generation has earned the title ‘American’ by following a simple moral command: that we give our children better than we received; that we pass on a greater future with more freedom and more opportunity... If we, right now, are prepared in the spirit of our ancestors to join in common cause, putting principle before party and patriotism before profits, then we can reclaim for ourselves and our children the idea and promise of America. The hour has rung for us, we the people, to rise up and take back our democracy and our country!”

Brown’s “We the People/Take Back America” campaign was scoffed at by party fundraisers. Money talks and most of the media predicted a quick demise for our campaign. A campaign contribution limit of \$500.00 was set and most professional politicians and pundits said we’d shot ourselves ‘in the foot’ for no good reason. Where would the money to finance the campaign come from? If not corporations and big spending interests, who would pay for a Brown campaign? By campaign’s end we’d raised over ten million dollars from independent contributors and unconventional sources.

The campaign opened its national campaign office in Los Angeles, where I spent time helping organize the Media and Issues departments. Efficient turnaround to press requests was key. Next order of business was funding and Jerry announced a “new media” idea that he’d make ubiquitous – a toll-free 800 phone-in number that he’d hold up to the camera and announce every time and everywhere he spoke. Millions of dollars poured into the Brown campaign coffers. The professional campaign consultants, political insiders and big money donors were astounded. The Clinton campaign ignored the Brown campaign at first, and refused to debate or address issues Brown was raising. They invoked the sobriquet “moonbeam” to describe Jerry’s ‘far-out’ programs as Governor of California – for example, establishing a California “Department of the Environment.”

Jerry Brown was a serious threat to the Clinton campaign, the DLC and Democratic Party's "get-back-the-Reagan-Democrats" strategy. In his two terms as California's governor, succeeding Reagan, he had one-upped the 'great communicator' with budget surpluses (which in turn had led to Proposition 13, a hugely popular tax cut which was to have future repercussions, but set the stage for more fiscally prudent proposals by the Governor.) As former head of the California Democratic Party fundraising, Brown knew the downside of insider trading. Under Brown's tenure, California contributions to the national party and candidates ranked number one in the nation. For some reason, known only to him, Brown had a conversion somewhere along the way and, instead of continuing to collect contributions and make promises in return, he quit the money game and began to speak out against "unholy barter". He saw a light, left the fundraising-game-as-it-was-played and decided to run for president. He chose to keep big money interests at arms length – and pushed back to make way for individual contributions. By the time the campaign arrived in New York, we were running ahead of the Clinton campaign by some estimates, having won primaries, while forcing the Clinton campaign to up-the-ante with attack ads and their fundraisers to look quickly elsewhere for deep pockets, which eventually came back to bite their campaign in a fund-raising scandal.

Why didn't Jerry Brown choose to welcome more money into the campaign, big money contributors that another big-time political Californian, Jesse Unruh, famously called the "mother's mile" of politics? Jerry Brown believed he could shape a different way than politics-as-usual. An independent mix of fiscal conservatism, social liberalism and environmental vision, Brown grew up surrounded by a political world and deal making. He knew the rules of the game but chose, purposefully, to have a showdown, western style, with the new big money of the Democratic Party. Quoting Texan Jim Hightower: "You can't clean up the *creek*... unless you get the hogs out of the water." The Brown campaign was out to clean up the two-party system by pushing big money back as a step toward accomplishing a broad-based reform agenda.

Surprising the media/press/political pundits, the Brown campaign's ideas found growing popular support and the series of electoral victories took Brown from back-of-the-pack, in racing terms, to neck-and-neck with Clinton going into the final primary season stretch. The New York election would decide whether Clinton or Brown was the Democratic nominee. Campaign advisors pressed Brown with several strategies after his Connecticut primary win going into New York. My personal advice was to "shift gears", that the campaign now must articulate "how we would govern if elected". Patrick Caddell and others counseled that the campaign had to continue on as an insurgent campaign, to speak of Washington D.C. as "ungovernable" and that Brown's campaign had to emphasize getting rid of "influence peddlers". The Clinton campaign was nearly out of money and, for the first time, agreed to debate. In the meantime Brown announced, surprising many in the campaign, that he was considering choosing Jesse Jackson as his vice presidential running mate. His 'election surprise' fell flat.

The pushback was immediate. Although Mario Cuomo, the N.Y. governor, continued to express support of Brown's candidacy, a Brown-Jackson ticket was dead on arrival in New York. The Jackson decision, N.Y. Times editorials by Abe Rosenthal blasting a

campaign that had the *chutzpah* to say D.C. is ungovernable (then why are you running?), and a Paul Tsongas 'bounce', foretold the N.Y. primary results. It was the end of the race for the nomination but not, we thought, the end of the party platform debate and general campaign planning... The individually funded, reform effort of Brown went down in Manhattan but the campaign had received deep and broad support from reform-minded Americans. We'd carry the campaign message through to nomination at the Democratic convention. The Democrats and the nation could benefit if real reform was put forward, money pushed back and doors opened to change the way the people's business is conducted.

Few party officials were focused on how the Brown reform message resonated however. The end of the primary season, instead of bringing Democrat focus on our campaign's "Take Back America" message brought a flurry of interest, excitement and popular outpouring for an unlikely "Take Our Country Back" message put forward by a Texan billionaire. Ross Perot, founder of a data processing computer company that had made most of its money from government contracts, announced in February on Larry King's syndicated TV show that he was giving some thought to running a reform campaign for president and that 'folks' should let him know if they wanted him to run and he'd seriously consider running if he could get his name on all fifty state ballots. The performance and sound bites led to the United We Stand/Reform Party and his "Take Our Country Back" presidential run.

He drew from our issues papers, white papers and speeches. I was astounded at times, for example, once when I debated the Perot campaign manager at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and listened to near-verbatim lines taken from our criticisms of the North American Free Trade Agreement, but with the famous Perot tagline describing NAFTA as a "great sucking sound". The Reform Party was hardly a popular movement. It was Perot's campaign and Perot's money. When Perot and his money went away a few years later, the party quickly split up but not before it influenced the balanced budget debate. Today the post-Perot *Concord Coalition* is still going strong in the face of George Bush's escalating deficits. In 1992, the 19% Reform Party vote for serious reform was the swing vote, the decisive margin in defeating George H. W. Bush and electing Bill Clinton. As the smoke cleared on Election Day, Clinton was president. His "first one hundred days" in office loomed. The Brown campaign's reform ideas that gave rise to the Perot 'reform' campaign, that led to defeat of the Bush campaign, was nowhere to be seen. What happened?

A Pastrami Sandwich

What is it with food and politics? Food and political arguments? Just when we think it's safe to venture out, here comes food and culture, food and civilization, food and history. It was a pastrami sandwich that changed everything with me and turned my personal life around again. Until my lunch at the Democratic platform hearings, I was still holding out hope for politics in the Democratic Party. After lunch, it was time for a new course.

I recall the ingredients. On the plate was "jobs" as the first course, then "lobbying reform" as a springboard to healthcare insurance and then we'd move on to the main course, the "first one hundred days" of the new Administration. That's it. I wasn't looking for sweetness and light. The Clinton campaign was hoping to win and the Jerry Brown campaign was hoping to take our success and add a bit of bite to the convention and the national campaign that Democratic national chair Ron Brown and their team were planning. I'd been fortunate to be able to help shape ideas in Jerry's campaign and it was time to talk turkey with the Clinton campaign. The message of the Brown campaign had resonated among younger voters, independents, workers and environmentalists, progressives and a broad base of traditional democratic interests. Why shouldn't the Democrat party and Clinton campaign want to broaden its vote and reach out. Our platform was a way to send a message.

As the Brown campaign gathered momentum, I recommended to Jerry and campaign manager Jodie Evans that we had to assemble our key positions into a more specific "We the People" platform. Time would demonstrate that many of our key positions were on target in the primaries, but at that moment what I was attempting to do was just "get it in writing." At first, Jerry was unconvinced that the campaign needed a formal platform. Running strong and fast, he couldn't slow down but agreed the campaign needed to get prepared for "the longer run."

I worked with Jerry and the campaign to assemble our ideas into a "working platform." I'd organized position papers for the Media, Issues, and Correspondence departments and, with staff at the national headquarters, began compiling an *ad hoc* platform document as a start. We'd been recording audio tapes and making transcriptions of Jerry's speeches as he raced across the country. These transcripts were organized into issue areas (and were very useful for instant response media and press requests.) We then began editing the speeches, analyses and policy proposals as "whitepapers".

By the time of the Democratic platform hearings as a result, Brown had a detailed, robust "Platform in-Progress" which contained a reform vision for consideration by the Democratic Party. It rekindled the message Jerry first announced at Independence Hall. The overarching campaign motto was to "Taking BackAmerica" on behalf of "We the People."

The message of the Governor's campaign was, we believed, strong and forceful enough to act both as a shield against Rove-Bush attacks, as well as offering a proactive point of view, a vision of how political election/lobbying/finance reform would pave the way to significant legislative initiatives, beginning with healthcare. We would make a case that our reform message should become a key ingredient in the D's future plans. It was time to talk with Ron Brown, the DNC chair and Clinton campaign rep.



Steve Schmidt and Jerry Brown
at the Democratic Party Platform Hearings

A private luncheon meeting was arranged. I was to meet with Ron to talk about the direction of the party and the “first 100 days” in office. I carried a letter from Governor Brown summing up expectations. It was not auspicious in its setting. Ron was sitting at the table eating a pastrami sandwich while we talked. The gist of the conversation was ‘If you agree to push positions from the “We the People” agenda, an endorsement from the Brown campaign could be on the table.’

Ron was impeccably dressed, two assistants stood behind the table, watching. His pastrami sandwich was waved at me he wiped Thousand Island dressing away from his mouth as we spoke. He said OK to talking about the Democrat's campaign platform but he wasn't open to talking about NAFTA and "globalization." He cut me off when I talked about Jerry's position and I referenced our briefing book and campaign debate. I began to talk campaign finance limits, an agenda pushing back lobbying interests ‘in order to pass’ needed health care, trade and tax reform, environmental standards.

“First things first, one can't be accomplished without the other”, I told the Chairman, “the health insurance industry has to be kept at arm's length before the administration can expect to pass real health reform legislation.” I made the point – tens of millions of Americans don't have health insurance or adequate health care security. Start with lobbying reform then move onto health care legislation, where debate in Congress would have a chance to reflect the public's call for basic health care insurance and there'd be real chance of passage. Ron looked uncomfortable. I referred to Texas-style populism and Jim Hightower's Texas “hill country” and tried to be humorous to lighten up the moment – “You can't clean up the *creek*... unless you get the hogs out of the water” – but this wasn't what Ron wanted to hear. We talked a little longer, then with an abrupt wave of his sandwich, he leaned forward in confidence so his two associates standing in the background couldn't hear: “We don't need Jerry's endorsement, we don't want it... pass that along to him. Your campaign's put us in a financial hole, one we didn't need to be in... and we don't intend to unilaterally disarm... remember Willie Horton? You think the Republicans are going to disarm and limit their fundraising?”

We're going to match them dollar for dollar." He then told me in conclusion to "go [deleted] yourself".

The rest of the meeting was a long good-bye. I'll spare the reader my response to the Chairman's tough talk. When he talked about the money game, I thought of World War I generals locked into trench warfare. Trench was what they knew and this was how they fought, locked in a death struggle. I thought about Lee Atwater and how he died apologizing for the type of political warfare he worked to set in motion and how he had, in so many ways, prevailed. It was a money game, there was no backing down. I thought about dirty tricksters and bagmen, the currencies of the realm.

Ron Brown saw himself and the Democratic Party at war and vowed not to "unilaterally disarm." He was responsible for money and access. The game was Democrats versus Republicans, partisan warfare now, with rich spoils to the victor. This is the way it is, this is the way it will be. Ron's responsibility was to raise the millions needed to prevail – and he would do what he had to do with relish. Campaign fundraising and spending limits, lobbying reform and governmental 'openness' were off the table. I watched the scene almost as if I was watching a Hollywood film. It was like an old friend I'd played half court basketball against, Jeremy Lerner, who went on to write Redford's *Candidate*, was there taking notes. Now what are you going to do?

I realized my years within the Democratic Party were over. It was time to move on, to be independent, shift gears, time to challenge the Republican *and* Democratic parties. Not long after my lunch with Ron, I joined the New Mexico Green Party, took what I knew and set out to build a "serious, credible, platform-based" independent party. I would accomplish what I set out to accomplish, an alternative political party would become a nationally recognized party in a matter of years with nationally standing with the Federal Election Commission in 2001.

And Ron Brown? He went on to become Secretary of Commerce touring the world on behalf of American corporate interests and dying tragically in Bosnia when his government plane crashed into a mountain. He was under Federal investigation for financial irregularities at the time. Serious charges had been brought involving lobbyists and payoffs. A series of inquiries were made as to the circumstances of the plane crash. The circumstances were challenged. With Ron Brown's death, there would be no federal indictment and no further investigation of the money trail.

Perhaps Ron got too close to the money he saw as ammunition and wherewithal. Perhaps if Ron Brown had ordered chicken soup and with President Clinton and Al Gore had some faith in a more independent Democratic party, without addiction to big money, it could have been a different outcome at the table that day. Perhaps the Democrats would not have suffered historic election losses during the eight years of Clinton's presidency with more state and local seats turned over to Republicans than at any time since the "Gilded Age" of the late 19th Century. Perhaps it could have been free trade *with* fair trade provisions, worker rights *and* environmental protections... American health care could have come about, enhanced revenues too, a new definition

of national security, civil liberties, electoral reform – a government that reflects a broad, diverse cross-section of America. The list is long and growing longer... what could have been and should have been.

If the Democratic Party hadn't attempted to become Republican as Harry Truman so famously quipped when he reminded rightward leaning Democrats that voters given a choice will always vote for an outright Republican instead of a "masquerading Democrat", perhaps President Clinton wouldn't have had to quip in a Convention speech about Democrats aiming for "a good life", like "Republican's live."

*What used to be called liberal is now called radical;
What used to be called radical is now called insane.
What used to be called reactionary is now called moderate,
and what used to be called insane is now called solid conservative thinking.*
-- Tony Kushner

The political spectrum has shifted far to the right now with Democrats and Republicans outdoing each other to play the big money game. The distinction between the D's and R's is narrowing everyday on the issue of 'pay-to-play' politics. If Ron Brown, Bill Clinton and Al Gore had been open to campaign finance and lobbying reform, perhaps the nation would have embarked on a different path, accruing many of the benefits of the 1990s without the scandal, money-hustling mix of policy and insider-wheeler-dealer trading. Perhaps the deregulation frenzy that will bring consequences would not have been, perhaps decades long protections like Glass-Steagall wouldn't have been abandoned, perhaps the financial services business wouldn't be driving the bus and the checks and balances would be kicking in. Perhaps Al Gore wouldn't have been accused, tainted by money-hungry, politics-as-usual and might even be President of the United States.

Perhaps we wouldn't have seen George W. Bush striding, deciding, a 'decisioner' Commander-in-Chief. Who knows? The argument can be made a number of ways and at the end of the day I realized how a personal choice, a sandwich and a lunch can be a 'game changer', a conversation can shape a campaign, one moment can be a bit-a-history.