

THE 1976 UNITED STATES SENATE
CAMPAIGN OF DAVID BOLIN;
A SPEECHWRITER'S PERSPECTIVE

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David G. Bolin, Smyrna attorney, was a candidate for the 1976 Democratic nomination for the United States Senate. Informal polls showed that Bolin was the early frontrunner for the nomination.¹ Yet on August 5, he captured only forty-four thousand and fifty-six votes and finished fourth behind nominee James Sasser, three-time loser John J. Hooker, and Madison automobile dealer Harry Sadler.² What then were the factors which caused him to run so poorly in this Democratic primary?

This paper provides an analysis of the Bolin for United States Senate campaign. The author has attempted to present an overall campaign picture. Readers should be aware that he was very much ego-involved with Bolin. Starting in April, 1976, and continuing through August 5, the author either worked in the state campaign headquarters or traveled with and for the candidate practically every day. He wrote many of

the statements and press releases made by Bolin. In addition, he worked with the chief researcher to prepare the ten position papers released by Bolin during July.

In analyzing the campaign, this report will first discuss those **positive** factors which existed in the Bolin campaign, next suggest some serious liabilities, and finally examine the candidate as a speaker.

CAMPAIGN ASSETS

Bolin was the frontrunner early in the campaign because he got off to a fast start. He actually decided to run in late 1975 and began to put his organization together at that time. Because he started much earlier than the other candidates, Bolin was able to establish a campaign organization throughout the state at an early date.

In 1974, Bolin had been Governor Ray Blanton's state campaign manager. While this association proved to be a liability in some respects, it was a positive factor in the early stages of the campaign. As he formed his organization, the candidate enlisted many of the same people who had worked in the Blanton campaign. As a result of these and other state contacts, Bolin had organized approximately seventy counties with a committee chairman and at least two or three committee members by May of 1976.³ By election day, the Bolin staff had ninety-two of the ninety-five counties

organized. The remaining three had representatives who distributed literature and posted Bolin signs.⁴

Bolin was able to secure the services of able campaign aides. He chose mostly young people for his headquarters staff, and despite their political inexperience, the majority of them performed credibly. Significantly, the Bolin campaign had no payroll. Several of the staff members received expense money but no one was salaried. Many of the state headquarters staff received no financial remuneration for their contributions of time and effort to the campaign. They worked for David Bolin because they believed he was the man for the job.

Another significant plus for Bolin was his personal makeup. He was and is an extremely hardworking young man. He asked no one to work harder than he did. No member of his campaign staff labored more diligently than did the candidate. On many occasions he would return home from a day of campaigning at 1:00 or 2:00 A. M. and by 6:00 A. M. would be on the road again. He had a remarkable ability to be fresh, alert, and pleasant throughout the campaign.

This writer is convinced that Bolin was and is honest and sincere. He campaigned on the theme of honesty and faith in government. He believed in what he was saying, and had he been elected, without a doubt would have worked for the participatory government which he advocated. Bolin

campaigned for a government in which people could be involved after election day.⁵ He promised to establish a communications system which would make the office of the United States Senator accessible and available to the people of Tennessee. Again this author believes that this promise was more than campaign rhetoric. Bolin sincerely believed in what he was saying.

A final asset for the candidate was his ability to relate to citizens on a one-to-one basis. He exuded a self-assurance which made people respond to him very positively. He had an almost infectuous grin and once told the writer that one of the things he enjoyed most about campaigning was making people smile by being friendly with them. It is the opinion of this writer that Bolin's strongest asset was his ability to shake hands with the voters and make them feel good and important to him.

CAMPAIGN LIABILITIES

Unfortunately, only half of the picture has been presented at this point. The Bolin campaign also have some damaging liabilities. Two of those liabilities -- money and name recognition -- are of equal significance. The campaign was beset with financial problems from the very beginning. Bolin chose to take his campaign to the people and declined to seek the support of the strong financial

interests throughout Tennessee. Thus he relied mainly on contributions of one hundred dollars or less. The little interest in this race -- attested to by the low voter turnout on August 5 -- combined with small contributions caused the campaign to cut back its efforts in some very vital areas. While other candidates were buying billboard space, newspaper ads, and radio and television spots, Bolin was forced to rely mainly on handshaking and word-of-mouth publicity to win votes.

If the candidate had possessed high name recognition among the voters, the lack of publicity would not have been nearly as damaging as it was. One of his opponents, John Jay Hooker, did possess high name recognition and as a result engaged in very little publicity until shortly before the election. Of course, the fact that Hooker lost indicates that publicity is necessary even with high name identity. But the polls indicated that Bolin had about five percent name recognition in June -- hardly enough to win a statewide campaign.⁶ No formal polls were conducted to gauge name recognition later in the campaign, but it is likely that he failed to achieve more than twenty-five percent name identity by election day.

These liabilities worked hand in hand against Bolin. Had he been able to buy advertising, he could certainly have raised his name recognition level. By the same token, if he

had had more name recognition, he would have received more contributions from the electorate.

In addition to the two major liabilities discussed above, Bolin's campaign had other difficulties. His lack of experience as a candidate was damaging to his cause. This was his first attempt to win public office. He had great difficulty turning the campaign over to his staff and trusting its judgment while he took his case to the people as a candidate. In retrospect, Bolin might have been wise to begin his political career by seeking an office which would not have required a statewide campaign with its extensive time, financial, and organizational demands.

The candidate was experienced in political campaigns, having worked for John Kennedy, Buford Ellington, and Ray Blanton. But most of his efforts in those campaigns were in campaign organization. Thus his natural bias was to stress organization to the detriment of other important areas such as finance, research, speeches, press conferences, and press relations in general. This neglect led to serious problems with press releases and public statements, as is indicated in the next section of the paper.

A serious problem for Bolin was the strong support of Governor Blanton and his followers for the candidacy of James Sasser. As has been reported in the Tennessee press,⁷ Blanton was instrumental in raising money for Sasser and in influencing

people throughout the state to support him. Even though many polls indicated that Blanton was an unpopular governor in 1976, he was able to use the power of his office to provide much needed support and money for Sasser's candidacy.

It is extremely significant that in May and in June, Sasser possessed only about five percent name recognition -- almost exactly that with which Bolin started. But because Sasser was able to raise money and enlist broad Democratic organizational support, he increased that name recognition factor and became a viable option to John Jay Hooker. Results of the election indicate that the voters sought an alternative to Hooker. That Sasser became that alternative was the major reason for his victory.

One final liability leads to the third area of consideration. Bolin was not a strong public speaker. During the course of the campaign he did show significant improvement as he gained both experience and confidence. His speaking ability, nevertheless, was more of a liability than an asset. The final section provides an analysis of Bolin as a speaker.

BOLIN - THE POLITICAL SPEAKER

It is unlikely that Bolin's speaking ability or lack of it cost him the election. As indicated earlier, the two major factors in this unsuccessful campaign were a lack of money and low name recognition. Yet this writer believes that

Bolin could have influenced more people and increased the number of votes which he received had he been more willing to work on his speeches, interviews, and press conferences.

Earlier it was stated that the candidate was oriented to campaign organization as a result of his experience in this area. He is extremely good at campaign organization. As a candidate, however, he needed to leave it for others to do. In devoting so much time to organization, he neglected some very vital matters which a statewide candidate must attend to. It was difficult to get him to schedule press briefings or appointments for discussion of the issues. Although his research division formulated and published ten position papers, Bolin was never as knowledgeable about them as he could and should have been. Those times when he did attempt to read and digest prepared materials, he was so preoccupied with organization that he failed to absorb important issues and news items.

As a result of this lack of knowledge, Bolin often was reluctant to say anything of substance. He feared being caught in contradictions and erroneous statements.

To his credit, he did begin in July to discuss issues such as social security, energy conservation, alternative energy sources, and employment and inflation. One of his best issue statements was made in Murfreesboro at a Bolin rally on the issue of social security. Following is a portion of that statement:

The situation is thus bleak for the thirty-two million Americans on social security and for all of us who look forward to social security as a substantial part of our retirement income. What are we to do about it?

1. I would like to see the next Congress pass a resolution that would state its intent to guarantee the security of payment of benefits now and in the future.
2. We must view the system realistically. It is not an insurance plan but instead a tax. Our future policy should be based on that view.
3. We must formulate and fund programs that will ease the burden of unemployment and inflation. The Humphrey-Hawkins employment act is a good start. We need more legislation like it.
4. We must raise the maximum level of taxable income for both employers and employees. In order to better share the cost of social security among the poor, middle-class, and affluent in our society, we believe that the maximum level should be raised to \$28,000.
5. We must push for a repeal of the present law which provides for a double-index in computing social security benefits and support stronger legislation to protect our older citizens.⁸

Throughout the campaign Bolin preferred to rely on one set speech which usually began and ended the same way. The speech was between three and five minutes long and soon became rather trite and boring. Had there been some inspirational phrases in it which stimulated the listeners, the set speech would have been much more acceptable. But unfortunately he said little about which the listeners could get excited.

Bolin was either unable or unwilling to take new ideas and incorporate them into his speeches. Even if he had material which he realized would help the speech, he felt

that he had to know it thoroughly before using it publicly. Unfortunately his campaign priorities seldom allowed him time to learn new material.

His hesitation to depart from the set speech was due to extreme nervousness and stagefright in the early going. As the campaign progressed, he did overcome much of his fear of speaking. Yet he remained either unable or afraid to incorporate new ideas while delivering a speech. This writer considers this inability to incorporate new and timely ideas a serious deficiency in Bolin's speech preparation and presentation.

Although he had the aid of people who were politically knowledgeable and competent in research and speechwriting, Bolin was unwilling to accept material prepared for a speech or news conference as he received it. Inevitably, he would make lengthy changes in anything which he received. Oftentimes speeches, news releases, and statements which had been analyzed and approved by the entire communications staff would be changed drastically by the candidate. His justification usually was that the material just did not "feel right." These changes took a great deal of the candidate's time as well as that of his staff and were depressing for the staff members.

Certainly any candidate has the right to guide his own words. It is after all the candidate who is offering

himself to the public. Thus Bolin's penchant for extensive rewrites would have been acceptable had he been able to improve or significantly change the ideas or thrust of his statements. But usually he neither improved the material nor changed the ideas. Instead, his changes often ended up being little more than word selection, word order, or minor organizational changes. Many times he preferred to insert some of his time worn phrases in exchange for fresh and interesting approaches, a futile endeavor that only consumed valuable time. This continuous practice by the candidate was one of the most frustrating parts of the entire campaign.

Bolin's performance in the interview situation was a significant part of his campaign communication. In fact, he probably was involved in many more interviews than speech situations. His usual mode of operation was to dominate the interview with long-winded answers replete with stories and campaign experiences.⁹ Because he was unfamiliar with many issues, Bolin attempted to keep the number of questions small, thus minimizing the chances that he would contradict himself or be asked about something with which he was unfamiliar. Perhaps this strategy was sound for the candidate, but it certainly left some reporters and voters with the impression that he had little to say.

Thus, in general, Bolin's speaking was something less

than an asset for him. All of the preceding comments are not to say that he had or has no ability or potential as a speaker. The improvement which he demonstrated from April to August was significant. The major problem was that the last four months are not the time in a political campaign to be improving. Had he realized how much improvement was needed, Bolin could have polished his speaking ability prior to the buildup of the campaign pressures of May, June, and July.

Bolin's approach to the tone of his statements must be discussed at this point. Throughout the campaign he constantly reminded his staff that he wanted to run a positive campaign -- certainly a noble aim for the candidate. Bolin never really understood, however, what a positive campaign consists of. He was unwilling to state situations which existed -- with all of the negative factors involved -- and then talk about why he and his programs **were** needed to improve flaws in the status quo. Bolin was reluctant to criticize anyone or any program except on a broad basis such as the "social security system" or "national energy conservation." As a result, his statements and releases were seldom newsworthy and were often ignored by the press, much to the frustration of the staff.

As Brown and MaKay state in their book, The Rhetorical Dialogue, "Something is newsworthy if it is new, unique,

controversial, unexpected, or deals with conflict, attack or change."¹⁰ Bolin's concept of what was newsworthy was far different from the above explanation.

By June it was obvious that if Bolin were to have any chance to win the race, he had to rid himself of the stigma of his association with Governor Blanton, especially since Blanton had thrown his support to Sasser. Practically every exposure which he received from the media labeled him as Blanton's 1974 campaign manager. In light of Blanton's reported unpopularity and because Blanton had chosen not to help him, it was apparent that the campaign efforts were being harmed by this association.

Notwithstanding, Bolin was reluctant to criticize the governor or any of his people. He was very much concerned with party unity after the primary and did not wish to alienate any Tennessee Democrat. It was not until late June that he decided that he had to speak out concerning some of the campaign tactics being used by members of the Governor's staff. It was not the urging of his advisors which made him decide to criticize the Governor. Instead Bolin began to see first hand that pressure was being exerted on his supporters either to work for Sasser or to stay out of the race. The candidate decided that he could not stand silently while this pressure was being exerted on the voters.

Following Bolin's decision to speak out, sessions were

held at state headquarters on June 24 and 25 to plan the strategy. The first major statement was set for Tuesday, June 29, at the Governor's fundraiser rally in Blountville. At that time Bolin planned to criticize Blanton for violating his pledges of neutrality by working for Sasser and by exerting pressure on Bolin supporters. The statement read:

Power-broking is occurring in the back rooms in an attempt to subvert the will of the majority of Democrats across the state We cannot allow the power-brokers to subvert the will of Tennesseans in this Senate race.

When I decided to run for the United States Senate I didn't seek anybody's permission. And I didn't go to the power-brokers and money-changers to beg for their support.

My candidacy came from the people, and it is still by and with the people.

When I announced my candidacy, the governor promised his neutrality until after the August 5th primary. We were all promised that the power of Tennessee state government would never be turned against its own people, or against the Democratic party.

The time has come to demand that that promise be kept. I have no quarrel with any elected official or party leader who wants to work openly and positively for one of my opponents. That is their (sic) right and their (sic) privilege.

But I will not sit in silence and watch my supporters tell me with tears in their eyes that they are going to vote for me but they cannot work openly for me because they will lose their jobs or they will lose business with the state if they do. When our people are this much mistreated, it is a blatant abuse of power. It is both immoral and dishonest.

I challenge every public official and every party leader

to set this party free and let the people decide who the Democratic Party nominee will be.¹¹

Bolin also planned to attack the kind of politics in which party leaders attempt to influence the electorate to support a particular candidate through "behind the scenes maneuvering," or, in other words, "power-broker politics." These comments were to be made face to face with the governor and in the presence of the other candidates.

On June 25, however, Bolin decided to go ahead with these comments at a Democratic rally in Chattanooga. The effect was extremely positive for the candidate. Newspapers throughout the state reported Bolin's comments, some as a leading story.¹² Bolin had definitely made an impact in the race by going on the offensive and showing that, indeed, negative factors did exist in the status quo and that these things had to be rejected by the voters.

Campaign staff morale rose tremendously. Bolin had made a giant stride toward becoming a strong challenger to John Jay Hooker. Strategy was quickly formulated to continue with a stronger statement at Blountville. Unfortunately, it never happened. By June 29, both Blanton and Sasser were aware of the Chattanooga statement and had prepared their own remarks about party unity and those candidates who would divide the party. Instead of continuing on the offensive in spite of these statements, Bolin backed off and talked

instead about other topics.

From that time until election day, it was a continuing story of attack and retreat, attack and retreat. Bolin had found the issue that he so desperately needed but was unable to capitalize on it as he had to in order to show that he was definitely a candidate capable of winning the primary.

These statements -- even though they were not as strong as they staff recommended -- did succeed in ridding Bolin of the Blanton stigma. Other candidates began to brand Sasser as Blanton's hand-picked candidate. When it became apparent that Blanton was supporting Sasser, Sasser assumed the role of the Governor's choice. Blanton and Sasser continued to deny that the Governor was supporting Sasser. But, as was stated earlier, it is generally agreed that Blanton was very important in Sasser's winning effort. Perhaps it is possible to conclude from Sasser's strong showing that the Governor may not be as unpopular in the state as polls have indicated.

Thus the race continued with each candidate attempting to show that the contest was between John Jay Hooker and himself. The election remained very dull. Low voter turnout on August 5 testified to the sparse interest in the race. The issue became one of who could succeed in polarizing the race and become more attractive than the old standby, John Jay. The answer was that Jim Sasser was able to do just that.

In the last two weeks of the campaign, Sasser flooded the television with his promotional spots. The press began to comment that the race appeared to be between Hooker and Sasser, and in the voters' minds it became just that. Bolin's campaign, from that time on, was on a continuous decline.

Apparently, the voters of Tennessee were determined to put an end to the political career of John Jay Hooker. The anti-Hooker sentiment was far deeper than many people thought. Because of his massive television campaign, because of the help of Governor Blanton and the party regulars, and because he was a fairly attractive candidate, Sasser was able to project himself as a worthy alternative to John Jay Hooker. That left Bolin along with Kefauver and Sadler out of the picture. None of them was able to become an attractive candidate for the Democratic nomination to run against Bill Brock. These factors plus the low voter turnout combined to allow Sasser to win the nomination.

While Bolin could not be classified as a good speaker, he definitely improved as the campaign progressed. This writer believes that he profited from the mistakes of this first campaign. In order to be a more effective campaigner, Bolin must remember to mention those things which are wrong with the status quo and then show that he offers a better alternative for improvement. Bolin must be more willing to heed the advice of his aides. He must believe in their work as well as their

desire to help him and let them run his campaign.

If he does offer himself to the people, David Bolin certainly can be a viable candidate for public office in the years ahead. He is a bright, young man who has stated his desire to serve the people of Tennessee. He advocates government in which people are involved and in which people have a say about what government does. The writer believes that Bolin represents the kind of government which most people want in the years ahead. The experience of a state-wide race will doubtless be valuable if and when he runs again.

NOTES

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¹The writer had frequent conversations with Bolin and other staff members. Information which the staff received indicated that Bolin won some of the polls taken at the Governor's multi-county fundraisers. Because other candidates did not announce their intentions early, Bolin received notice as the senatorial candidate.

²Official total as recorded by the Tennessee State Election Commission.

³Bolin kept an up-to-date map of the state which was color coded depending on the degree of organization. In addition, written records were kept concerning the status of each county organization.

⁴The records referred to above indicated that all but three counties were organized by election day.

⁵Bolin believed that most politicians are interested in the people only until they get elected. He wanted to establish open lines of communication which would allow the voters ready accessibility to the senator's office at any time.

⁶This figure is based on a poll conducted by professional pollster Pat Caddell. Mr. Tom Griscom, political writer for the Chattanooga Free Press communicated this information to the Bolin camp and also ran it in his newspaper column.

⁷Nashville Tennessean, August 8, 1976.

⁸Excerpt from speech given at Murfreesboro Bolin-For-Senate Rally, May 28, 1976.

⁹This statement is based on personal observations. The writer accompanied Bolin when he was interviewed by the editorial board of the Nashville Tennessean, by Mr. Lee Smith, publisher of the Tennessee Journal, and by reporters for the

Cleveland Banner, Murfreesboro Daily News Journal and Nashville Banner. This statement is also based on the writer's impression of Bolin's appearance on the Teddy Bart Show, a Nashville afternoon radio talk show.

¹⁰John J. MaKay and William R. Brown, The Rhetorical Dialogue, Contemporary Concepts and Cases. Dubuque: William C. Brown Company, 1972, p. 451.

¹¹This excerpt is from remarks prepared for delivery at the Governor's Fundraiser Rally in Blountville, Tennessee. Because Bolin decided to launch his attack in Chattanooga four days prior to the rally, these remarks were never delivered.

¹²The Chattanooga Free Press and the Nashville Banner carried lengthy reports of the meeting and of Bolin's comments. Several smaller newspapers, both daily and weekly, reported the story during the following days. Bolin's comments were also aired throughout the state via radio and television.