

National Review Online

January 15, 2003, 9:15 a.m.

Golden Possibilities California is winnable for Republicans.

By Shawn Steel

In the aftermath of the historic November elections, Republicans around the country are scratching their heads and asking, "What is up with California?" They're not alone. Speaking as a California Republican, it's disconcerting to watch your home state act as a seawall repelling the national Republican tide and handing the Democrats complete domination of state government.

It's easy to blame the defeat on unfriendly demographic changes, an alleged tectonic shift to the left, and the Democrats' overwhelming superiority in money and organization (actually, the last has a lot to do with it). If it were as simple as that the Democratic ticket should have won in a landslide, not by the narrow margins they actually received. Only Attorney General Bill Lockyer was able to break 50 percent. It's one thing for the intensely unpopular Gray Davis to eke out reelection with just 47 percent of the vote. But for all other Democratic statewide candidates - lacking Davis's baggage - to be elected by similarly anemic percentages indicates Democratic dominance is a mile wide and an inch deep.

In fact, Republicans picked up two seats in the state assembly and a state-senate seat that had been redistricted to elect Democrats.

The defeat of the statewide ticket here was largely man-made. No one worked harder or had a better message than Bill Simon. Merely citing Bill Simon's inexperience and his chaotic, mistake-prone campaign staff only goes so far. Attention needs to be paid to the man-behind-the-curtains: Gerald L. Parsky.

Parsky is a liberal, ultra-wealthy Los Angeles investor. He's also President Bush's self-appointed man in California, a sort of White House California viceroy. He holds no formal title or party office and few Republicans know his name, but he is unarguably the single-most-powerful Republican in the state. He has the last word in federal judicial appointments in California, and harbors aspirations to be treasury secretary.

Seeds of the Election Day disaster were planted a year ago, when Parsky muscled through a restructuring of the state party that transferred executive authority from the elected chairman to an unelected operations committee controlled by himself - effectively severing ultimate control of the party from grassroots activists and giving it to a small oligarchy.

As party chairman, I voluntarily assented to the experiment on the strength of promises by Parsky that he would, in exchange, leverage his close relationship with the White House to raise at least \$10 million for the party's political plan. Lacking a Republican governor or U.S. senator, California Republicans desperately need the help of a Republican White House to raise the huge sums necessary to be competitive in the fall election.

Thus began a string of broken promises and blockheaded decisions that significantly contributed to our losses this November. Parsky bestirred himself to raise only \$3.5 million of the \$10 million he originally pledged. The relative ease with which he accomplished that - that money was raised with just three fundraising events - left many party leaders wondering why he chose not to raise the additional millions that would have made the difference in some close races.

The promised stream of Cabinet officers and other high administration officials to raise funds proved to be less than a trickle. While Parsky did bring in Vice President Dick Cheney to headline two of his three fundraising events, and Karl Rove and Jack Oliver touched down for brief donor tour, Parsky was curiously unable to include a single fundraising opportunity on the itineraries of more than 100 visits to California by Cabinet officials during the last year.

At the same time, Parsky - who controlled party finances and expenditures - starved state-party operations, hoarding revenues in separate campaign accounts and refusing to fund vital campaign efforts until very late - too late - in the game.

This indifference and mismanagement bled into the Simon campaign. Parsky threatened to block funds for Simon's candidacy unless his campaign was put in the hands of Rob Lapsley - a long-time operative who had been in charge of Secretary of State Bill Jones's abysmal gubernatorial primary campaign.

Lapsley was behind shifting the line of attack away from Davis's greatest weakness - his bungling of the energy crisis - to his ethics. Simon campaign strategist Sal Russo claims that this was done, against his own advice, at the behest of "donors" (read Parsky) by means of more financial blackmail. Russo also says that TV spots targeting Davis's gubernatorial record were produced - ads that actually moved voter opinion - but unfortunately were spiked by the same "donors."

Ignoring wiser counsel, Lapsley rashly decided to release the famous photo purporting to show Davis illegally accepting a contribution in a state office. Instead, the photo turned out to be in a private home and was perfectly legal. He didn't even bother to verify the circumstances of the photo until after it was released. The ensuing uproar deprived Simon of credibility and the momentum needed to pull ahead in the home stretch.

Although Simon needed all the help he could get, Parsky advised Bush to stay away from California during the cross-country barnstorming that did so much to power the Republican recapture of Senate. As Ken Khachigian noted in the Wall Street Journal, "The president's last political visit to California was in August, so Mr. Davis was sheltered from the withering backwash of Air Force One and those high octane rallies which pulled so many other Republicans across the line."

Tom McClintock, the conservative state senator who was the nominee for controller, was also a victim of Parsky. McClintock, a popular conservative thinker and leader, led in all the polls and had the best chance of any Republican to win a statewide office. The RNC had sent Parsky \$600,000 to help the down-ticket candidates. Even though McClintock was fighting for his life against a multimillionaire Democratic opponent who was pounding him on TV, Parsky passed him a paltry \$100,000 and sent the remainder to moderate candidates with much-dimmer prospects of winning. It's worth noting that McClintock - easily the most-conservative member of the statewide ticket - received more votes than any other GOP statewide candidate, ultimately losing by only 22,000 votes out of almost 6.5 million cast.

In addition to hamstringing ideologically incorrect Republicans, Parsky ignored urgent advice to counter the Democrats' aggressive voter-registration drive. California voters are 44 percent Democrat and 35 percent Republican, with 15 percent declining to state their affiliation - the narrowest gap in years. Significantly more funding could have gone towards a vigorous, end-of-cycle registration program to further shrink the gap and make GOP candidates that much more competitive. Unfortunately, Parsky rejected the additional funding needed.

These actions had real-world impact. The Democrats credit their win in the 18th Congressional District (Gary Condit's old seat) to a net gain of 25,000 new Democrats (vs. 4,000 for the Republicans) during the last four months of the campaign, after Republicans had reduced the Democratic lead earlier in the year from a gap of 17 percent district to seven percent.

We cannot undo the bungling, but we can at least learn from it so it isn't repeated in 2004 and 2006. So, what is to be done?

WINNING STRATEGIES

- First, since the president stands an excellent chance of winning California's 55 electoral votes two years hence, Gerry Parsky ought to rethink his role as Republican strategist-in-chief for California. Consider his track record: In 2000, as then-Governor Bush's campaign chief in California, with \$24 million to spend, he brought Bush into the state for four time-wasting visits in the closing days of the presidential campaign, only to lose by 1.3 million votes. That strategy cost Bush time and money in four states he lost by less than one percent - Oregon, New Mexico, Iowa, and Wisconsin - and caused the grueling post-election electoral stalemate.

- Second, accountability must be restored in the state party. Presently, the operations committee serves as a mystery body, where no one receives credit or blame. Since my term next month, such action has no bearing on me. But if the

party is to attract dynamic chairman candidates, the position ought to be worth having.

- Third, and most important: In the long run, California Republicans must adopt a dramatically different approach to winning elections. Democrats enjoy a perennial advantage in their ability to deploy a veritable army of thousands of paid workers at every election. Republicans have to match that effort if we are to prevail in the future.

This isn't a pipedream. Republican National Committee research on the 1998 and 2000 elections revealed that the Democrats consistently exceeded pre-election surveys by four or more points due to massive GOTV efforts in the last three days of the campaign. The RNC rolled out a "72-hour Plan" program in 31 states this year in an effort to duplicate that result - with great success.

This ground-attack effort was a central factor in the GOP's stunning November success in Georgia - which for years had stubbornly resisted the GOP tide in the south - where Rep. Saxby Chambliss defeated Democrat senator Max Cleland, Sonny Perdue beat Democratic governor Roy Barnes, and the GOP took over the state legislature. The defeat of Barnes, an up-and-coming political leader often mentioned as a vice presidential pick for 2004, is widely considered the upset of the year. Ralph Reed, Georgia's GOP state chairman, broke all the barriers and fielded 3,000 paid and volunteer canvassers, bringing about a landmark political change.

The approach is straightforward: Recruit thousands of college students during the summer to work weekends until Election Day. Their jobs would be to talk to the 25 percent of Republican who are not regular voters, work with conservative independents, encourage absentee balloting, and push reluctant Republicans to the polls on Election Day. It's not astrophysics; it's working the precincts and doing politics - something Republicans should know something about.

The RNC paid to dispatch hundreds of workers to targeted states to assist in the final push. The entire effort was costly, but paid off in terms of more personal voter contact. Last March, I proposed a similar program of 10,000 paid and volunteer workers to fan out across the state: knocking on doors, registering voters, getting supporters to the polls, and generally whipping up excitement for the ticket on the ground. It would have been expensive, but we would have been well positioned to exploit a favorable turnout scenario and gained an extra three-five points on Election Day - sufficient to have pushed several of our statewide candidates over the top. Unfortunately, Mr. Parsky refused to fund it.

Perhaps the evident success of the RNC's 72-hour plan will change some minds.

For those who think California is simply hopeless for Republicans no matter what they do, take a look at this map. It compares how the state's 58 counties voted in 1998, the year of Davis's landslide election, and this year when he limped to reelection. Davis counties are colored (appropriately) green, while counties that went Republican are colored (also appropriately) red.

The difference is striking. The 1998 map boasts a thick green belt of counties encompassing the coast, the Bay Area and all of southern California except Orange County - the 34 counties won by Davis. The 2002 map, however, is a sea of red, with Davis reduced to 18 counties - basically Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and the northern coastal tier.

Despite a gubernatorial nominee whose campaign never got off the ground, Republicans recaptured a lot of territory. If the party can restore its vigor, replicate the success of the ground attacks like Georgia's, and capitalize on the president's popularity, I am optimistic George W. Bush will win the state's electoral jackpot and Barbara Boxer will be sent back to Marin County where she belongs.

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National
Review
[Selections from the 1/27/03 issue]



NRO January
1503.doc