

Fighting The Last War

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Generals are notorious for their tendency to "fight the last war" -- by using the strategies and tactics of the past to achieve victory in the present. Indeed, we all do this to some extent. Life's lessons are hard won, and we like to apply them -- even when they don't apply.

Sadly enough, fighting the last war, is often a losing proposition. Conditions change. Objectives change. Strategies change. And you must change. If you don't, you lose.

Probably the classic example is the French Maginot Line constructed in the aftermath of World War I. France adopted this phalanx of fortifications to prevent the Germans from repeating the August 1914 invasion that resulted in four years of bloody trench warfare.

Unfortunately for France, Hitler and the German generals outfoxed them by inventing the blitzkrieg--a new and terrible form of lightning warfare that simply went around and over the Maginot Line.

The principle that fighting the last war can be disastrous doesn't just apply to generals. It also applies to political consultants. James Carville and Paul Begala are a case in point -- and a point with a cruelly ironic twist.

The now famous duo had engineered the senior Bob Casey's thumping of Bill Scranton in his first successful election as governor in 1986 and Harris Wofford's stunning upset over Dick Thornburgh in the 1991 special U.S. Senate election -- an election that thrust Carville and Begala into national prominence and the opportunity to run Bill Clinton's presidential campaign a year later. And as they say the rest is now history.

The presence of a Carville-Begala type campaign in this spring's Pennsylvania primary seemed to be much in evidence and not simply because a Carville protégé ran Bob Casey's campaign. The campaign seemed vintage Carville--Begala. It featured tough negatives, a tendency to isolate the candidate, and a willingness to answer every charge and correct every mistake made by their opponent.

But hold on just a moment. The Casey campaign may have been vintage Carville-Begala, but the masters themselves were nowhere near the scene of the crime. Nor if they had been, would they likely have approved of much that was done

Their new book, called "Buck Up, Suck Up," leaves no doubt of that. We don't know if these guys have spent much time touring World War I battlefields, but they sure as heck understand the lesson of the Maginot Line.

The book contains a series of tutorials in which they explain the secrets to their success in winning campaigns. Intriguingly, these lessons are at variance with the conventional wisdom associated with a Carville-Begala campaign. These are two generals who are definitely not fighting the last war.

But back to the Pennsylvania primary. Guess whose primary campaign looks as though it could have used the book as a blue print. First hint -- it was not the campaign run by the Carville-Begala protege. Second hint -- it was not the losing campaign.

Check out these gems from Buck Up, Suck Up, and you be the judge.

Frame the Debate: Successful campaigns define what gets debated and attempt to control the political environment. It was Ed Rendell who made experience the defining aspect of the campaign. His argument that as mayor of Philadelphia he had the toughest job in the state, and he was more qualified to be governor than his opponent was the single most important reason Rendell's supporters gave for voting for him.

Be Open: This lesson can best be explained by a simple expression used in the book -- "just say it". Nothing exemplifies the Rendell campaign and the candidate himself than their ability to communicate with voters. Rendell went everywhere and spoke with anyone; he was open and candid -- and he struck the people he met as remarkably open and truthful. Equally important Rendell was himself, meaning what you saw is what you got. True, when his big campaign bus rolled into the state's small towns, his campaign gave the appearance of a rock star arriving in town, but the Rendell who jumped off the bus bonded with almost everyone he met. Neither his rumpled appearance, nor his overweight countenance, nor his gruff mannerisms seemed to matter. Even people who did not vote for him found him trustworthy.

Work Your Butt Off: If any candidate has ever logged more miles and personally saw more people than Rendell, we don't know who it might be. The most fabled campaigner in the state today is Senator Arlen Specter, who, until Rendell, had no equal as a retail campaigner, but Specter never came close to matching Rendell's tireless work ethic. Rendell visited many places six and seven times, reinforcing the one big point -- he wants to be the next governor. Rendell returned phone call after phone call, tirelessly appealing for money and support. No one has ever worked harder for a major party nomination than the former mayor of Philadelphia.

Know How To Communicate: Sounds trite doesn't it, but it's just as true for politics as in life. The essence of communication lies in one's ability to make a point in ways that relate to the real experiences of people. The best way to communicate is to tell a story. Ronald Reagan mastered the art and did not need to know the details or the facts to move Americans. Rendell rarely made a point about a program or a policy proposal without relating it to a person he knew or an experience he or someone he knew had had. He may have gotten his facts wrong on occasion, but his impact on the people he met was immeasurably greater.

Turn Weakness Into Strength: The curse of Philadelphia is the notion that no Philadelphian can win election to any important statewide office. The Rendell campaign took a liability and turned it into an advantage. Rendell talked non-stop about the city he inherited in 1992-bankrupt, depressed, crime ridden, a city going nowhere fast. Rendell told the Philadelphia revival story, especially his role in the revival, over and over until he turned his biggest negative into one of the most important reasons to vote for him.

So Rendell wins with lessons articulated in the latest Carville-Begala book-while Casey loses with a Carville-Begala prot?g?. There are probably enough lessons here to fill the next several issues of Campaigns and Elections magazine. One thing, however, seems clear. Here in Pennsylvania we have come full circle.

Pennsylvania's 1986 gubernatorial election ushered in a hard negative, slash and burn, style of campaigning that quickly spread into national politics, and Pennsylvania's 2002 gubernatorial primary may have ushered it out.

More and more campaigns might look like Rendell's primary campaign--and fewer and fewer will look like Casey's. If so, it will happen because the old style has stopped working. When campaign strategies and tactics change, it is always for the same reason. The old ones aren't working any longer.

This will be a hard lesson for some strategists--and there will be a few more old style campaigns before the old habits are gone. But make no mistake. We are entering a different era. The old one started in Pennsylvania and fittingly enough it ended here too.

R.I.P.

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