

11. WASHINGTON STATE FOR THE DEMOCRATS

According to Democratic Party rules, there should not have been a Democratic presidential primary in Washington state on February 29, 2000. National party rules clearly specified that no state, other than Iowa or New Hampshire, could hold a presidential primary prior to the first Tuesday in March.

But Washington state Democrats decided on a unique course of action. The state party decided to select its convention delegates on March 7, 2000, the first Tuesday in March of 2000, thereby meeting the requirements of the national Democratic Party rule that no delegates be selected prior to that date. Then the Washington state Democratic Party scheduled a non-binding presidential primary on February 29, 2000, to correspond with Washington state's Republican presidential primary.

Democrats in Washington state thus could register their first choice for the Democratic nomination for President at the ballot box, but the primary election results would have no effect on the delegate selection process, by caucuses, one week later.

Presidential primaries that do not select delegates to the national convention are referred to as *beauty contests*. Their influence on the presidential nomination process varies. Sometimes beauty contests, such as the one scheduled by Washington state Democrats, get lots of candidate and news media attention and become significant. At other times, because no convention delegates are at stake, beauty contest presidential primaries can be totally ignored.

By staging a beauty contest in late February, Washington state Democrats hoped to get presidential candidates to pay more attention to their state. But they worried that, because it was a non-binding primary where convention delegates were concerned, the candidates and the news media might bypass the Washington state Democratic presidential primary completely.

As it turned out, Washington state Democrats got a presidential primary far more important than they initially expected.

* * *

Democratic presidential candidate Bill Bradley faced a difficult problem in mid-February of the year 2000. Albert Gore, Jr., the sitting Vice President of the United States, had defeated Bradley in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. No other Democratic presidential primaries were scheduled until the multi-state mega-Tuesday on March 7, 2000. Bradley desperately needed an opportunity to draw attention to his candidacy and score a primary election victory prior to that giant voting day on March 7.

Bill Bradley decided that Washington state would be the place where he would make an all-out effort to defeat Al Gore. With a week to go before the Washington state voting on February 29, 2000, Bradley cancelled his entire campaign schedule in all other states and spent six straight days speaking and hand shaking in Washington state. So dramatic was Bradley's shift in tactics that the news media began referring to Washington state as Bradley's "last stand."¹

Suddenly the Democratic voters of Washington state found themselves in the midst of a real presidential primary election. Bill Bradley upped the tempo of his campaign by giving more forceful stump speeches and using more of the gimmicks that get presidential candidates on television. Thus Bill Bradley was seen handing out donuts to striking workers on a picket line in Spokane and serving chili to a crowd of his admirers in Seattle. And, taking a tip from the John McCain play book, Bradley began holding town meetings at which he stood for hours answering questions from undecided voters.

There was even a humorous side to this lighter and looser and Bill Bradley. When he encountered an environmentalist woman wearing a suit that made her look like a salmon, Bradley said brightly: "Keep on swimming."²

Vice President Al Gore responded to Bradley's efforts to hype the Washington state primary by coming into the state himself. Gore spent the major part of the weekend before primary election day campaigning mainly in the Seattle-Tacoma area where most of the population lives. Gore did

not adjust his campaign tactics. He continued his relentless attack on Bill Bradley for being too cerebral and theoretical in his approach to national problems.

"The presidency is not an academic exercise," Gore told a gathering of Democrats in a union hall. "It's not a seminar on some grand theory. It's not a place from which to ponder problems. The presidency is a day-by-day fight for real people who face real challenges and need a real champion who is willing to fight."

With both Bill Bradley and Al Gore campaigning hard, Washington state emerged almost overnight as a major battleground in the year 2000 contest for the Democratic presidential nomination. When the votes were finally counted on primary election night, the eyes of the nation - particularly the eyes of the national news media - were firmly focused on Washington state and its so-called non-binding Democratic primary.

* * *

Al Gore smashed Bill Bradley in the Washington state Democratic primary. By more than a two-to-one margin, some 68 percent to 31 percent, the Vice President royally took the former U.S. Senator from New Jersey to the cleaners. The Gore victory was so convincing that many of Bradley's top supporters were said to be urging him to admit defeat and withdraw from the race.³

Once the Washington state results were known, the news media immediately declared Bradley's campaign for the presidency dead and buried. A typical press eulogy appeared in the *New York Times*: "Given the humiliating margin of defeat, and Mr. Bradley's earlier losses..., it was difficult to see where he could make his next stand with any great expectation of turning things around."⁴

When the political reporters get down on a candidate, the photo-editors that select photographs for newspapers and magazines are quick to follow suit. The day after Bill Bradley's big loss in Washington state, a photograph was printed in a New York newspaper that showed "Mr. Bradley looking detached, and chilly, as he campaigned on a ferry to Seattle." One prominent

Bradley supporter described the photograph as "pretty dismal."⁵ If Bradley had won in Washington state, the photograph selected would have shown him smiling and surrounded by cheering supporters.

The newspaper columnists and television commentators came down hard on Bill Bradley once it was collectively decided he had lost the race to Al Gore. Mike Allen of the *Washington Post* noted that the Bradley campaign seemed "to have evaporated a little more each day." Allen faulted Bradley for only holding one to four campaign events a day, rather than staging a multitude of events all day long, the way the other candidates were doing.

Mike Allen pointed out that many of Bradley's events were too late in the day for the evening news casts. And Bradley would take a day off every now and then, occasionally on a Sunday, "one of the easiest days to make television news."⁶

Gail Collins of the *New York Times* agreed that the Bradley effort had just sort of flickered out. "Bradley's candidacy...just sort of faded away," she wrote. "It was one of those campaigns in which the high points are the announcement and the withdrawal."

The *Times* columnist noted that Bradley's biggest problem was his lack of vim and verve on the campaign trail. Gail Collins quoted a nurse at a Bradley rally in Seattle who quietly grumbled: "Unfortunately, a certain amount of showmanship is required."

Gail Collins also complained about the upscale nature of Bradley's supporters: "His audiences were full of ...people with great insurance coverage worrying about universal health care. Bradley had the nicest supporters of any candidate. There just weren't very many of them."⁷

It did seem that most of the people who actually lacked health insurance were avidly supporting Al Gore.

David Broder of the *Washington Post* recalled the time Bill Bradley was waiting to speak during the Sunday service at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Seattle. The choir and congregation were rocking back and forth to the hand-clapping rhythms of a gospel hymn. But Bill

Bradley "was almost motionless, as if in his private reverie." David Broder concluded: "Bradley is losing to Vice President Al Gore ...largely because he has failed to connect with voters any more than he caught the spirit in that Seattle church."

Bradley also was faulted by David Broder for attempting to win *both* the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. Bradley wasted valuable time in Iowa, David Broder said, that could have been better spent in New Hampshire, the more important of the two races. Bradley should have followed John McCain's example, skipped Iowa, and plunged all his effort and resources into winning New Hampshire.

Similar to most other columnists, David Broder saw Bradley's disappointing loss in Washington as ending his quest for the White House. Broder wrote: "But the career that was marked with such promise, from schoolboy days onward, will not reach the presidency this year."⁸

Several analysts were quick to point out that the Bradley effort among the Democrats was greatly damaged by the overnight success of John McCain in some of the Republican primaries. The press and public only have so much time to give to the various presidential nomination races. When the McCain campaign took off, independent and anti-establishment voters who might otherwise have supported Bill Bradley flocked to John McCain. So did almost all the newspaper and television reporters. This was particularly true in states such as New Hampshire and Washington state, where independent voters had the option of choosing to vote for Bradley in the Democratic primary or John McCain in the Republican primary.

Political "oxygen" seemed to be the favored word for explaining this phenomenon. "Independent voters have forgotten about Bradley," said one pollster. "McCain has taken all his oxygen."⁹ Another analyst chimed in with this deep thought: "It's really not Bradley's fault. You can't start a fire without oxygen, and John McCain is sucking it all up."¹⁰

Theoretically the Democratic and Republican nomination races are completely separate from each other. But that was not the case in the year 2000. McCain was so obviously stealing

independent votes and press attention from Bradley that some analysts theorized that John McCain, and not Al Gore, was Bradley's main opponent.¹¹

* * *

Thus it was that Washington state's non-binding beauty contest presidential primary, which should have amounted to nothing, became a critical stop on the year 2000 Democratic primary trail. Bill Bradley sought to make Washington state important, succeeded, and then lost the election. That defeat guaranteed the year 2000 Democratic presidential nomination to Vice President Al Gore.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 11:

1. Richard L. Berke, "Bradley Backers Are Already In Mourning," *New York Times*, March 2, 2000, p. A22.
2. James Dao, "Bradley Hits His Stride In The Other Washington," *New York Times*, February 28, 2000.
3. Mike Allen, "Bradley Reportedly Being Urged To Withdraw," *Denver Post*, March 1, 2000, p. 17A.
4. B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., and James Dao, "Gore Meets Expectations In Voting In Washington," *New York Times*, March 1, 2000.
5. Richard L. Berke, "Bradley Backers Are Already In Mourning," *New York Times*, March 2, 2000, p. A22.
6. Mike Allen, "A Case Of Missed Opportunities," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, February 21, 2000, p. 13.
7. Gail Collins, "Eight Months Of This?," *New York Times*, March 11, 2000, p. 7B.
8. David S. Broder, "Bradley's Defeat," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 6, 2000, p. 4.
9. Mike Allen, "A Case Of Missed Opportunities," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, February 21, 2000, p. 13.
10. Kenneth T. Walsh, "Meanwhile, On The Democratic Side...," *U.S. News & World Report*, March

6, 2000, p. 20.

11. James Dao, "For Bradley Campaign, Contest For Democratic Nomination Has Become A Three-Way Race," *New York Times*, February 14, 2000, p. A17. James Dao, "Bradley Hit By Questions Raised By McCain's Success: Concerns Over Swing Voters' Going GOP," *New York Times*, February 25, 2000, p. A13.