

# Campaign 1996: Searching for Its Structure

*An Interview with Richard B. Wirthlin*

**Public Perspective:** What does the President's position with the electorate look like to you, as a veteran Republican strategist, a year and half out from election day?

**Richard B. Wirthlin:** First, he's considerably stronger now than he was, say, seven months ago. The way he responded to the Oklahoma City bombing, showing calm and leadership, drew a positive response from much of the public. As a result, his approval ratings have climbed. We just came out of the field with a survey in mid-May which recorded Mr. Clinton's approval rating at 56% of the public. By way of comparison, the CBS News/*New York Times* poll done in early April before the bombing put Mr. Clinton's approval at just 42%. The Gallup survey done in mid-April had his approval at 46%. So, Clinton has received credit for leadership of late. To this I would add that the President has extraordinary political skills. He should never be underestimated in terms of his capacity to rally support in the population.

The President's vulnerabilities are substantial nonetheless. At this point I would say that his reelection chances are not good—although the time between now and the election is an eternity in the political arena these days. Much can change. Still, when one looks at the electoral vote map, Mr. Clinton's position in terms of reelection appears weak. Key to this weakness is the South, which historically was heavily Democratic and now is solidly Republican. Looking to the immediate future—the next five or six years, which is about as far as we can see given the frantic pace of political change—it's hard to see Mr. Clinton or any Democratic presidential hopeful getting many electoral votes in the South. So I would make a distinction between the President's capacity to rally public support, which is still substantial, and

the electoral vote situation which he confronts, where it is very hard to see him getting a majority in a two-way race.

**PP:** Turning to the Republicans, what (apart from the President's position) are their main electoral assets? Their liabilities? Is there an area where the stance of the Republican leadership departs from majority impulses in the population?

**In the nine issues that will appear between now and November 5, 1996, *Public Perspective* will run a continuing series of articles and interviews that will explore elements of the contest, beyond today's headlines, that push it along an underlying course. Republican strategist, Richard Wirthlin leads off this series.**

**RBW:** The Republicans' assets and liabilities follow naturally from the President's position. In many ways they are the mirror opposites. The Republicans start their run for the presidency with a very strong position in the South and, generally, in their prospects for gaining an electoral vote majority. The three key states, looking to '96, are Florida, Texas, and California. The Republicans start with an advantage in the first two of these states. I don't think it's possible for a Democratic presidential candidate, given the current electoral vote configuration, to win the presidency without winning California. I do think it's possible for the Republicans to win the presidency in 1996 without Cali-

fornia although, obviously, things look much more comfortable for them if they can carry that state.

Party identification is fairly volatile. Just after the 1994 congressional elections we showed the Republicans with a substantial lead in party ID of eight to ten percentage points. Now, things have settled back to essential parity. At the time of the 1992 presidential elections and in the months following; on the other hand, the Democrats had a margin in party identification. But throughout all of this, the portion of the public describing themselves as conservatives has outnumbered that calling themselves liberals by a consistently large margin. Our polls are showing a conservative over liberal proportion these days of roughly 20 points. That is an important Republican asset.

Republican and Democratic parity regarding party identification represents a tremendous movement from where Republicans were a decade and a half ago. When I was working in the Reagan campaign in early 1980, we confronted a situation in which the Democrats led the Republicans in party ID by a huge margin, on the order of 50%-28%. That enormous Republican disadvantage has been largely removed. I might add, though, that before I am prepared to claim that the Republicans have completely eliminated the deficit in party standing, which first became theirs during the Great Depression and which persisted for several decades thereafter, I need to see more movement at the local level—for example, in the state legislatures. Democrats still have a big margin in state legislative seats. What happens in the 1996 elections is critical in assessing whether full parity now has been achieved.

With regard to liabilities that the Republicans face, I note first that it would



be a great error for them to be overconfident. President Clinton has great political skills; and a victory in next year's presidential contest is not GOP-assured. The party also needs to navigate the balanced budget minefield. The public says again and again that it wants cuts in overall government taxing and spending, but it shows some real resistance to Republican proposals to cut the rate of increase substantially in certain popular programs, especially Medicare. In general, the party needs to show that it's not insensitive to the broad public interest in various governmental protections and services. While the tide has moved toward the Republicans regarding the perceived need to reduce the size of government, the party still needs to show that it can make reductions with moderation and responsibility.

**PP:** Let's talk about the Republicans' position on what at least to me appear to be the two main elements of the battle: the role of government/scope of government dimension (the subject of Newt Gingrich's Contract); and the moral dimension (the subject of Ralph Reed's Contract). Where do you see pitfalls for the party in '96? Unusual opportunities?

**RBW:** Speaker Gingrich's Contract with America was known or recognized by only a very small proportion of the electorate at the time of the 1994 vote. It did not figure prominently in the results. Since the election, however, the contract has been enormously politically important because it served as a rallying point for Republican action. The electorate wants change. Speaker Gingrich's determined leadership and the GOP House's swift action on the contract within the self-imposed deadline of the first 100 days are important because each have conveyed the Republican party's commitment to action.

It is true, of course, that the party will be assessed in part by just how much of the contract it has brought to fruition. Never mind the fact that there was no promise that the contract would be entirely enacted—only that it would be entirely voted upon. In the normal course of politics, the understanding has

shifted. There is now the expectation, it seems, that the Republicans had promised that the contract would be passed. This having been said, I think that the party is in a good position to make the case that where portions are not enacted, that's due in large part to the fact that the presidency has remained thus far under Democratic control. They are well positioned to say: We promised action. We

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have done a lot. We need to win the presidency to complete the changes that you, the electorate, want.

I believe the Christian Coalition's "Contract with the American Family," evidences political sensitivity. This "contract" for the most part avoids the most divisive social stands. For example, the "respect for life" proposals call for an end to late-term abortions, permitting states to refuse to use tax funds for abortions, and ending tax support for organizations that promote or perform abortions. The provision does not call for a constitutional amendment banning all abortions.

Much of the "Contract with the American Family" is really secular in its reach. It calls for crime restitution, for example, and returning more decision making in the area of education to local school boards and to parents. It calls for tax credits for children and eliminating the marriage penalty. The seventh component seeks to encourage people to give to private charities. Even though the rubric has been that this is a Christian religious contract, it is much broader than that. Apart from the respect for life provision, the only items which have an

explicitly religious or moral dimension are those calling for restrictions on pornography, and for privatization of the arts. The latter need not itself be seen in this context, of course, but it is proposed by those who resent that the government funds certain types of art which they consider morally offensive.

When I spoke to *The Public Perspective* a year ago (September/October 1994 issue), I argued that religious conservatives were displaying considerable political skill and maturity. I believe that the Contract with the American Family proposals are further evidence of such skill and maturity.

**PP:** Turning to the GOP field. How strong in fact is Dole? How open is the contest?

**RBW:** If Senator Dole is as strong a year from now as he is today, he will without question be the nominee. But, it is the "ifs" in politics that make it an interesting game. He clearly has run a solid, effective strategy in the opening months of the race for the presidency. He has made few mistakes; he has leveraged his ability to use his leadership in the Senate to speak out on issues that are of special concern to such groups as religious conservatives.

Dole is running a strong campaign. And certainly Senator Phil Gramm simply has not been able to ignite his campaign except in the two important areas of raising money and establishing a good organization. He's been set off track to some extent by his hassling earlier with the more conservative religious components of the party. But I think he now might be back on track.

While Bob Dole is strong at this juncture, it would be premature to say that he has the primary locked up. Gramm would still be considered the second strongest candidate; although, if for some reason Dole should stumble, I think it would be a wide open race between Gramm, Governor Pete Wilson, former Governor Lamar Alexander, and possibly an unannounced candidate. I think it would be wise to keep an eye on Speaker Gingrich, and Colin Powell.

The other candidates, such as Pat Buchanan and Arlan Specter, have a very remote chance of securing the presidency. Again, though, 18 months is an eternity as the political clock runs. One of the things that I think will condition the race next year will be whether there is a third-party candidate. Perot is a definite contender. On the other hand, Colin Powell would surprise me if he sought the nomination through a third-party vehicle.

**PP:** With regard to General Powell, you believe that he will either be in the Republican field or not in the race at all?

**RBW:** Yes.

**PP:** If he is in the race as a third-party candidate, it is devastating for the Republicans, isn't it?

**RBW:** It changes the whole chess board of the Republican primary. The one thing that is working against Powell every day is time. It takes time to gen-

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erate the organization, and the money, to run a presidential campaign. The window of opportunity is still open for Powell. I don't think it will remain open for more than another four months at most.

**PP:** You have known a lot of people who have sought the presidency and have won it. Whether a person decides to go for the presidency or not involves ambition and hopes for the country and confidence that one can do something. But there must be another large element of personality. Running for the presidency, after all, totally discombobulates one's life. Where does Colin Powell fit in that latter picture.

**RBW:** By nature and by training Colin Powell is very well qualified to be a presidential contender. But to take a strong political position was never part of his mandate. I don't think even Eisenhower aggressively saw himself as President. MacArthur was perhaps the only military man who had planned explicitly a potential political role in his life. I view Powell much more like Eisenhower than MacArthur. It wouldn't surprise me if he is experiencing the kind of dissonance that comes from being one thing all of your life and then looking toward the possibility of assuming a very different role in a field that you have consciously avoided. It has to be a difficult thing psychologically.

On the other hand, I believe that Colin Powell recognizes that the traits of leadership that he brings—of creating a vision of what America might become, of possessing a strength and consistency that are so needed in a presidency and which resonate with some of the most deeply ingrained values that Americans hold—are very congruent with the person that I know Colin Powell to be. When everything is said and done, Americans vote for a leader. And, leadership goes beyond the issues; it goes beyond political agendas; it goes be-

yond policy; it even goes to some extent beyond personality. Each element contributes to the impression that Americans build—as to whether or not this individual can be trusted to lead the country in a way that will be beneficial and supply security for the future and opportunity for our young people.

**PP:** The Republicans generally believe they have an extraordinary opportunity in 1996. Do you see a real danger in terms of the nominee muffing it—the party coming through with a candidate who is unable to provide the leadership and vision the electorate is looking for?

**RBW:** It's always a possibility in American politics. We don't have to reach further back in history than the last presidential election when President Bush seemed absolutely unbeatable 18 months before the vote, yet lost. Still, Republicans should be cautiously optimistic as we look forward to the 1996 presidential race.

**PP:** Race and gender in the 1996 campaign: No woman has ever been elected president or vice president, no African American ever elected. Is the country now prepared to end these historic exclusions?

**RBW:** Yes, I think it is. I base this conclusion on research that we have done around the US, and in particular in the South—where if there is a residue of resentment, you would expect it to surface. It doesn't surface there. So I think America, perhaps for the first time in your life and mine, is ready to accept anyone who is qualified—regardless of race, gender, or creed—to be the President of the United States.



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