

Pacing the Pack

With Swashbuckling Stuart Stevens Leading the Dole Air War, Don't Look For a Dull Campaign From the GOP Favorite.

Stuart Stevens may be the most romantic figure in campaign politics today. A young congressional staffer in the late 1970s, he went on to UCLA film school, produced a documentary about his breathtaking international tour of ski competitions, wrote two hip travelogues about remote corners of the earth, and helped script the highly acclaimed television serials *I'll Fly Away* and *Northern Exposure*. In between, he has become perhaps the most successful of Republican media consultants, guiding such clients as governors William Weld (MA) and Tom Ridge (PA), and U.S. Senators Dick Lugar (IN), Chuck Grassley (IA), Jon Kyl (AZ) and Dan Coates (IN) to victory.

Now he is performing the same duty for far-in-frontrunner Bob Dole's effort to capture the GOP presidential nomination next year. It is Stevens' highest profile assignment yet, and it has already landed him in the media cauldron for his recently published novel *Scorched Earth*, a political soap opera set in the Washington wilderness of ambitious politicians and Machiavellian consultants.

Stevens dropped by the new Ripon offices in late July—on the very day we moved—and provided a variety of helpful insights and observations on '96 strategies and the contemporary state of campaigns.

RIPON: *This somewhat racy novel of yours has been held up by the news media as some kind of hypocrisy in the wake of Bob Dole's attack on Hollywood values. Why isn't it relevant to the sincerity of the Dole campaign?*

STEVENS: This is a book which the *National Journal* called tame.

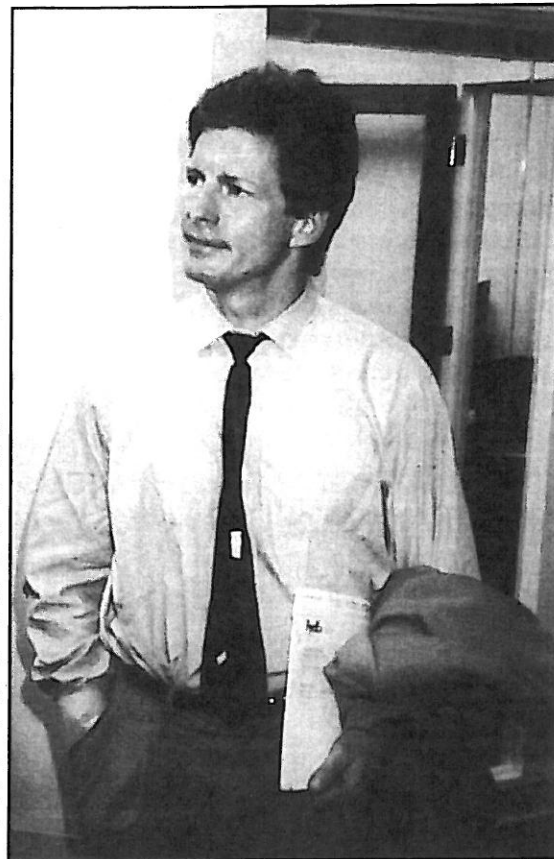
RIPON: *It reads like a TV movie—no offense intended.*

STEVENS: OK, a TV movie's fine. It's very much a kind of PG-13 film; it's a farce. I think that any effort to talk about that is totally demeaning to the public discourse, demeaning to the very important point Senator Dole is making about the debasement of culture, about the negative influence of these voices in our culture. To make an issue out of that book is to not understand or appreciate what Senator Dole is doing. Anyway, we know it's not that racy because I haven't gotten one call from Phil Gramm's brother-in-law about making it into a movie.

RIPON: *Pat Buchanan and Dole seem to be winning the expectations game thus far. Should Buchanan's nativist/protectionist/isolationist/moralist/populist brand of friendly fascism gain credence and a significant delegate bloc in the primaries, how should the Republican establishment respond?*

STEVENS: You paint that characterization of yours with a very broad brush. Pat Buchanan is a very intelligent, articulate person who has never had a problem finding an audience to appreciate him. The unexpected strength of his candidacy is primarily a strong indication of the weakness in the 'back pack' of this race.

RIPON: *You know the media are pulling for him. They would love to see him do well, figuring it will cause trouble for the Republicans at the convention. A lot of people hold to the theory he gravely wounded Bush with his strong presence at*



the '92 convention. You could very well wind up with a similar situation in '96.

STEVENS: I see no reason to believe that Pat Buchanan has intentions contrary to doing whatever he can to help elect a Republican president. That's what he says he'll do, and he's always been pretty good at going through with what he has said.

RIPON: *If Perot paves the way for a third party run by Colin Powell, how would your strategy change?*

STEVENS: I have a very scientific view of the situation. I believe—I choose to believe that Colin Powell is a Republican because—

RIPON: *He seems to be walking a tight rope right now.*

STEVENS: He's a popular figure who—like most Republicans—will end up being supportive of the Republican nominee.

RIPON: *You've got to be thinking about the possibility of his running as an Independent.*

STEVENS: There's plenty to think about with the field of candidates as it is now for the primaries. I'm not about to start spending my time thinking about hypotheticals for the general election.

RIPON: *We're not asking the question of you specifically in your role as Dole advisor—suggesting that you're overconfidently looking beyond the nomination—but rather as a Republican strategist looking at the possibility, regardless of who the nominee may be. If you've got Clinton one-on-one, your task is simple and fairly easy. With Powell in there as the third man, you've got tremendous complications. You haven't given that any thought?*

STEVENS: It's a hypothetical...I would hope that Colin Powell would be supportive of the Republican nominee. And I believe very strongly that it would be Bob Dole.

RIPON: *Are you going to [the United We Stand National Conference in] Dallas in August?*

STEVENS: No.

RIPON: *But Senator Dole is?*

STEVENS: Yes.

RIPON: *Here's a question you must get a lot: If Dole's nominated, he will be the oldest non-incumbent ever put forth for the presidency by a major party. How do you address the age issue?*

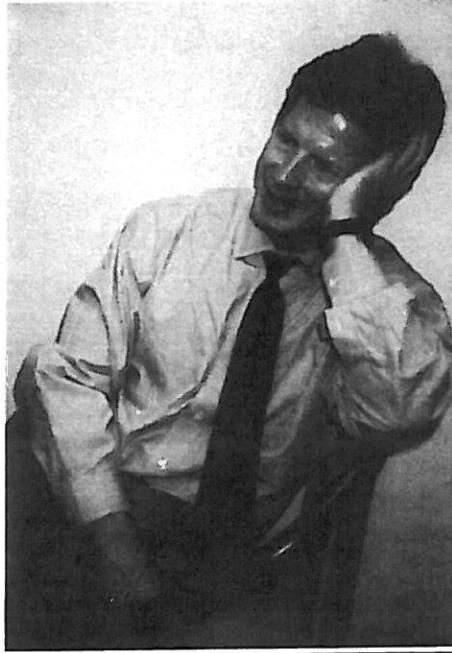
STEVENS: I think the "age issue" is not an issue at all, because of the tremendous vigor of Senator Dole. I run marathons; I'm not in terrible shape, but I had trouble keeping up with him the week I spent with him during the announcement tour; and if I had to spend another week with him, I would have ended up hospitalized. This man is the most vigorous, fit, focused, person imaginable. This is, I think, a non-issue.

RIPON: *There's a lot of speculation that he will be held to a stricter standard about*

any mental slip or any indication of physical infirmity.

STEVENS: I think that this race will be about very big things and this just doesn't work in that regard. I really don't worry about it.

RIPON: *What are Bill Clinton's greatest weaknesses?*



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STEVENS: It's not just that he's a liberal who campaigned as more of a moderate—it's not just that he's proven to run an extraordinarily unfocused and undisciplined administration. Those are generous characterizations. It's that there are certain intangible qualities in people very much wanted in their president; and even if you are a supporter of Bill Clinton, you have to agree that he is lacking in those qualities. Whenever you see the White House changing parties, it usually goes to someone who is a sharp contrast with the person currently in the White House. That bodes very well for Senator Dole. He has the qualities of

courage, character, commitment, steadiness—things people long for in a president and haven't been getting. Like anything else, you miss it more when you don't have it... People were so accustomed to it [during the Bush years] they forgot to consider what it would be like not to have it, so it became less of an issue in '92. Next year it will be very much an issue, because we'll have had four years without it.

RIPON: *You've worked a good deal with Dick Morris [the Republican turned-Democrat consultant who reportedly will direct the Clinton re-election effort]. How will he change the Clinton campaign?*

STEVENS: Ultimately, no one person can have a very large influence over the conduct of his campaign. They don't have a situation like they had in '92, where they could take this blank canvas and paint it however they wanted. People now have a tremendous amount of information about Bill Clinton. They've seen the man under a myriad of circumstances. And on the whole, the country has found him lacking in essential qualities it expects in a president. It's the height of political consultant arrogance to think that a few commercials can change that.

RIPON: *Won't there be a considerable difference between a James Carville-crafted Clinton campaign and one that Morris directs?*

STEVENS: This race is going to be a referendum on Bill Clinton. Of course, there are so many sides to Bill Clinton: OK, we're going to show the Morris side of Bill Clinton, the Carville side of Bill Clinton, and we're going to show the Mandy Grunwald side of Clinton or the Stan Greenberg side, or sides from the dozens of pollsters they have over there. They can keep turning it, but it all comes back to Clinton, the man everyone knows already. So, in the final analysis, it won't make a difference.

RIPON: *Republicans are getting some*

credit from the voters for downsizing the government right now; but the Democrats are making headway with the charge that we are robbing the poor to give to the rich. Is that our greatest weakness going into '96. And if so, how do you minimize it?

STEVENS: The country has reached a point of critical mass of believing that we have to change the course of government growth. The greatest danger would have been if somehow Republicans had flinched from the mandate we'd been given. That hasn't happened.

RIPON: *Except for term limits, perhaps.*

STEVENS: Voters are very well-informed and are very good consumers of information about their political leaders and political parties. There is an American sense of fairness operating here; they're not going to say, "All right, you did nine out of 10 things we sent you to do, but I'm still going to vote for the other guys." I just don't think that will happen; it doesn't happen in life very often. Republicans are very well positioned for 1996—very well positioned.

RIPON: *Although the approval ratings for Congress are back into decisive negatives again.*

STEVENS: There has been a phenomenon in recent years of a negative viewpoint towards Congress as an institution and more positive ratings for individuals. I think 1994 was a very English election, in the sense you had people not getting re-elected even though they were personally popular with their constituents; they didn't get the votes because they belonged to the wrong party, an ideology that those constituents did not agree with. The problem the Democrats now have is that it is very difficult to say what the Democrat Party stands for. You can't say, "In the following sentence, I will tell you why there should be a Democrat Party and why you should put that party in power." You could fill in that sentence with a dozen dif-

ferent contradictory answers. What has saved the Democrat Party in the past were charismatic leaders emerging at critical moments or the occurrence of negative events, such as Watergate. Without leadership at the top to articulate the party, it is emanating a tremendous amount of confusing negative energy that suggests a basic



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realignment is occurring. The Democrats had been the majority party throughout our lives; we had forgotten that it could be the other way around. That was the genius of Newt. We both first came to Washington in '79; his ability to see a very different world—even then—has been an essential element in making that world come to be. Now it has occurred, there's no reason to think that the Republicans can't have a very long run.

RIPON: *How would you describe the optimum Republican candidate for Congress in '96?*

STEVENS: You really can't play that game. Look at the people who got elected in '94—a tremendously diverse group of Republicans...wildly different profiles.

RIPON: *Does it help to be a woman or pro choice?*

STEVENS: I've never looked at the world in those kind of broad categories. Ultimately it goes back to the individual and their comfort with who they are. Personal qualities of an individual mean a lot more than X attribute or Y attribute or Z attribute.

RIPON: *Although in terms of the president, it certainly helps to have a military background. That seemed to be part of what you were alluding to in the rundown of Clinton's weaknesses and failings.*

STEVENS: What is most damaging about Clinton's lack of military background is its consistency with a defining pattern that has extended throughout his career: wanting to have it all both ways. I've worked for a number of other of candidates that did not have a background in the military and it never became an issue for them. In Clinton's case, it's the larger question of what it says about an opportunistic nature that is troubling. Also—Bob Dole is an American hero. And it's a time in which this country very much would like a strong leader to step forward. Clarity and strength are most appreciated after suffering with confusing weakness. Those are qualities that Bob Dole has had throughout his life—a very consistent pattern. A young man in Russell, Kansas. It's an extraordinary story, a very compelling story.

RIPON: *Bob Dole has long been regarded the funniest guy in Congress. But after his wounding in World War II he was on his back for two years and he still doesn't have full use of his arm. Some speculate that's given him a bit of a chip on his shoulder that sometimes came out at the wrong time: the repeated "Democrat Wars" crack during the '76 vice-presidential debate;*

telling George Bush via satellite to "stop lying about my record" the night he lost the '88 New Hampshire primary. At those times he seems to be very opposite of the witty man everyone knows in Washington; he comes across as a very bitter, dark character.

STEVENS: That's certainly not the Bob Dole that I see. I find him to be an extraordinarily appealing person; he has a combination of strength and gentleness that is tremendously attractive.

RIPON: Next year, what issues should Republicans emphasize?

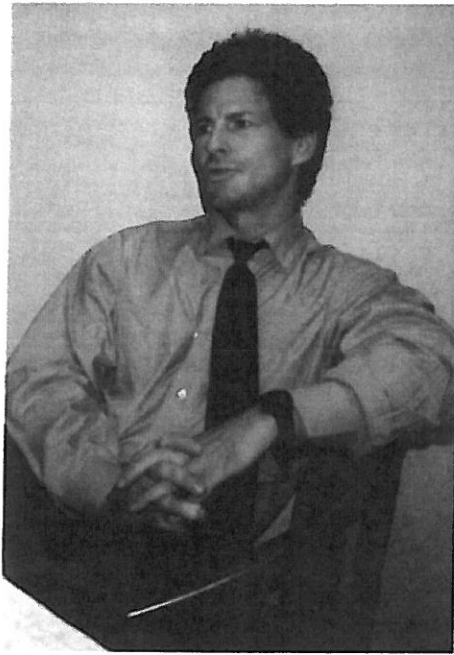
STEVENS: Every candidate should talk about that which they feel passionately. That's going to vary according to the individual and to the state and to the situation. The most compelling, successful candidates are those who can personalize their message, talk clearly about something they truly believe in and do it from a perspective that's very different from any other background. Someone with a background in business may talk more about the need to balance the budget, to cut taxes. Someone with a background in education or religion may talk more about their own sense of a need for renewed commitment to basic values. People need to articulate why they are running, which must go to a very deep passion.

RIPON: You've been called the leading practitioner of Hollywood techniques in campaign media: the fast cuts, hand-held camera, dramatic angles, the jamming of all kinds of visual information into 30 seconds.

STEVENS: I could give you a long list of one-cut spots that I've done with candidates talking on camera. The formula is that there is no formula. You have to play to the specifics of the situation that you are in.... The hardest task any successful political consultant faces is to avoid imitating your success. You have to be able to learn and

articulate what is unique about this particular client and their current situation.

RIPON: You have a background in writing scripts as well. Should a voter be communicated with differently than a consumer or a moviegoer?



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STEVENS: There aren't any rules here. I am not one to focus group every spot. You must remember the real world situation in which ads have to play, in which you will be competing for people's attention. Although very few people will be watching television for the purpose of seeing your ads, there are a lot of different ways to win that battle.... Commercials are a hotbed of creativity today, which was not true 10 or 15 years ago. Many future techniques of mainstream communications are being used today in commercials.

RIPON: Do you mean political ads?

STEVENS: No, all functions. People today are tremendously visually liter-

ate. The majority of voters have never known a world outside of television. That has a decided impact on the ways in which people absorb information.

RIPON: You have said 30 seconds is an enormous amount of time to communicate something, yet so many others complain that it is impossible to communicate anything worthwhile under such constraints.

STEVENS: There's a certain clarity to 30 seconds, but it requires a certain discipline. The challenge is to be able to deal with complex issues in a greatly compressed time frame.

RIPON: You write well-received books and scripts, and probably would make more money if you stuck with those pursuits. Why do you do spend most of your time political consulting?

STEVENS: I love campaigns. I love helping to articulate a Republican vision for the future of this country, whenever I can. I love being part of the team. I find it deeply gratifying to see people in whom I have tremendous faith get an opportunity to express themselves and reach their full potential. You have Haley Barbour—for whom I worked in the '82 Senate campaign—who I've always believed in. Given a chance to do an extraordinary job of communicating a Republican vision for the country, he has done so, with historic results. You see someone like Tom Ridge—who is just the most genuine, wonderful fellow you'll ever meet in your life—go from 40 points behind in the primaries to being governor of Pennsylvania. It's uniquely gratifying.... I've always been a very political creature, having followed politics very closely as a kid in Mississippi, having worked in campaigns, calling in phone banks, driving candidates and voters. As a Republican in the Deep South, I had sense of being part of something that was new, growing, exciting—that would change the world as I knew it. That energy is still there. I love it.