

## VICTORY?

**ELECTION DAY IS TORTURE.** You've finished crafting the message, cutting the ads, knocking on doors and reading the polls. Everything that you can do is done. But everything that really matters is yet to happen.

It's all over, as they say, but the voting.

On election night 2006, I was in a suite on the eleventh floor of the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill with a small group of staff, friends and family. While we waited, I paced the room and picked at cold calamari and oversized cookies. Having nothing to do brings out the worst in me—I get antsy, irritable and hungry.

I was not on any ballot this year. But the election was as personally important to me as any I'd ever lived through. I was the senator in charge of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), the political organization responsible for all the Democratic Senate races. Two years earlier, I had taken the job because I worried that if we lost three more Senate seats, beyond the forty-five that we held, there would be no check on the Bush administration's policies, which were doing so much damage to the country I love. For two years, I had been obsessed with preparing for this election. I had recruited candidates. I had raised money. I had approved senior staffs. And I had become friends with many of the Senate hopefuls whose fates were being decided on that night.

Now, waiting for the first returns—the polls had closed in Virginia and Ohio less than an hour earlier—I knew that Democrats were, amazingly enough, on the edge of actually taking back the Senate majority. To do it, we had to pick up six of eight vulnerable Republican seats and hold on to every Democratic seat, including six

tough ones. Supposedly, during a card game on Air Force One a few weeks before election day, President Bush had said that for Democrats to take back the Senate, “Schumer would need to pull an inside straight.”

I was still waiting to see the cards.

For the four hundredth time that day, I called J. B. Poersch, executive director of the DSCC, for an update on the exit polls—voter information gathered on behalf of the networks and craved by campaign staffs, which are ravenous for any morsel of data.

“How’s it look?” I asked as he picked up before it even rang.

“Mostly good.”

“How about the big four?” These were four close states—Missouri, Montana, Tennessee and Virginia—where we would need three wins.

“Missouri’s okay. Montana’s tighter.” In Missouri, we had Claire McCaskill, the popular state treasurer who had almost won the governorship two years earlier. In Montana, Jon Tester, a lifelong farmer with a quarter-inch crew cut and a keg for a belly, was our candidate. Both were trying to unseat Republican incumbents.

“Tennessee?”

“Not so good.”

“Virginia?”

“The first precincts are reporting.”

“And?”

“I don’t know.”

Suddenly, every BlackBerry in the room was buzzing.

“Chuck!” three aides yelled at once. “They’re calling Ohio for Brown!”

Phil Singer, the DSCC’s communications director—and the best in the business—came running into the room. “They’re calling Ohio—”

“I know.”

A staffer handed me a cell phone. “Sherrod Brown,” she mouthed.

“Call you back, J.B.” I said, pulling one phone from my right ear and putting another to my left. “Sherrod! You ran a great race! See you in the Senate.” Sherrod Brown had beaten incumbent Mike DeWine by running an energetic populist campaign in Ohio—a

state that, two years after making the difference for Bush, had turned bluer than a clear sky.

One down. Five to go.

Again, the room erupted in BlackBerry buzz.

“Chuck,” everyone yelled, “they’re calling . . .” Voices were lost in a jumble.

“Pennsylvania for Casey!” screamed half the room.

“And New Jersey for Menendez!” screamed the other half.

Bob Casey, pro-life and pro-gun, had unified the Pennsylvania Democratic Party and trounced the ultra-conservative Senator Rick Santorum. Bob Menendez, who had been appointed to his seat by New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine less than a year earlier, had overcome a barrage of nasty attacks to notch a solid win. They represented one pickup, in Pennsylvania, and one save, in New Jersey.

A minute later, two cell phones were thrust at me. “Bob!” I cheered. “Congratulations!”

Two down, four to go.

On the other side of the hotel room, an aide was monitoring Virginia’s official returns on the Web between writing lines for that night’s speech. I leaned over his shoulder. “How’s Virginia?”

“Webb’s down eight thousand. But less than half of precincts are in.”

I looked at my watch—a little past eight. It was going to be a long night. The last time I had lived through an election night this long was during my first campaign, for the New York State Assembly, when I was twenty-three years old.

**In 1974, I graduated** from Harvard Law School. After the ceremony, as my parents drove me back to Brooklyn, I broke the news to them: I wasn’t going to accept the job as an associate at the prestigious Manhattan law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison for \$400 a week—which, to us at least, seemed an enormous sum. Instead, I was going to run for the Assembly, right in the district where I grew up.

The Forty-Fifth Assembly District covered a row of middle-class neighborhoods extending from the Atlantic Ocean straight up into

southern Brooklyn—Brighton Beach, Sheepshead Bay, Midwood and Kings Highway, where I was raised. My parents didn't want me to run. They had struggled to send me to college and hoped more than anything that I would earn a "comfortable living." My mother kept telling me to give up the silly dream of being a politician and accept my fate as a corporate lawyer—something secure and respectable.

I would have none of it. My mind was set on elective office. After seven years at Harvard, I wanted to come home to Brooklyn and go into public service. There was no point in arguing; I was sure I wanted to serve my neighborhood as an elected official. I may only have been twenty-three years old, but the seeds that led to my decision had been planted many years earlier.

In 1964, when I was fourteen, I had to get a summer job. I ran a mimeograph machine for a Madison High School teacher who had come up with a new idea for a small business: He would prepare students for the SATs. The teacher's name was Stanley Kaplan and the company was Kaplan, Inc. Less than twenty years after I graduated from Madison, he became a multimillionaire when he sold his business to the Washington Post Company. God bless America!

By nine each morning during that summer, I would be at Kaplan's place, in a windowless three-foot-by-three-foot room that reeked of ink and ozone, running the mimeo machines. Around 9:05, I'd be going gangbusters; at 9:10, I'd check my watch. I'd check again at 9:15, 9:20, 9:30—by a quarter of ten I'd be sure it was four in the afternoon.

By ten, I'd be out of my mind with boredom, thinking of all my friends at the beach, playing basketball and trying to pick up girls. I didn't know how I would survive until the end of the day, much less for the whole summer. All day, every day, from ten o'clock until the end of work, I swore to myself that I would never choose a career where I'd be bored.

After Madison, I got into Harvard (in part because of those endless hours spent staring at SAT prep material spinning around the mimeo drum). In those days very few people from places like Madison went to Harvard. Sixty percent of the freshman class were from private schools, most of the rest were from wealthy suburban school districts. I was scared—how would I fit in? The one Madison guy who had gone to Harvard ahead of me suggested that I try out for the freshman basket-

ball team: I'd make the team because they were lousy, and I'd make friends. It was to be a social, not an athletic, endeavor.

So I went to tryouts. We each had little numbers clipped to our T-shirts as we waited in the Harvard gym.

"Number twenty-seven!" the coach called.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"You're Schumer?"

"Yes, sir."

"You went to Madison?"

"Yes, sir."

"You play forward?"

"Yes, sir."

"How tall you are?"

"Six-one, sir."

"Can you dribble?"

"Not very well, sir."

"Go home."

He moved on to the next kid without seeing me touch a single basketball.

I went back to my dorm room without having made a single friend. I sat down to write a letter to my parents. I told them I was already a flop here at Harvard; I should have gone to Brooklyn College.

That night someone from the Harvard Young Democrats knocked on my door. "How would you like to work on the presidential campaign of Senator Eugene McCarthy?"

I didn't have a political bone in my body. "Why not?" I sighed, throwing up my hands. "Who's Senator Eugene McCarthy?"

I spent much of the next several months in New Hampshire, knocking on doors for the McCarthy campaign. It was the most exhilarating feeling I had ever experienced: being part of this group, students and others who had never thought they had any power, all working together to stop a war that was unjust and defeat President Lyndon Baines Johnson, the most powerful man on earth.

Almost immediately, I caught the bug. To me, politics was the place where ideas and people met. I was elated to discover that it was possible to do good in the world—that a group of ragtag amateurs, fueled by students upset over the war, could truly change the course

of history. The system that we had read about in textbooks really worked—you could actually make the world a better place!

By March, when McCarthy came close enough in New Hampshire to convince Johnson not to run for reelection, I had decided I wouldn't be an organic chemist, as I had planned, but would major in Social Studies and go to law school. I figured I had to be a lawyer to make a living, but politics, my true love, would be my avocation.

I was at Harvard for seven years, through undergrad and law school. I loved it. But I always identified more with Madison High School than with Harvard University. If anything, I felt closer to Brooklyn after I got to Cambridge. Up there, where there weren't that many people like me, I was the guy from Brooklyn. And that felt right. While I relished the intellectual challenges at school, I quickly realized that I was more at home, at home.

I had grown up in a middle-class household in a middle-class neighborhood. My father was an exterminator, my mother volunteered in the community. My block, East Twenty-Seventh Street, was a mixture of firefighters and cops, salesmen and teachers, small businessmen and homemakers. We were first-, second- and third-generation Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants. My parents and my friends' parents worked hard. They cared for their families. They were honest, patriotic, decent and, all too often, under enormous strain. Life was good, but it was also tough.

As I was growing up, the government was distant from our daily lives, but we knew it was always there, behind the scenes. It was like a benevolent patriarch watching over us, protecting us from a distance; it was there when things went wrong. It provided security—for retirement, for safety, for health. And it represented a positive, moral force. When it became clear, in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, that President Johnson had lied to the American people, I was depressed for two weeks. We were raised to have such trust in government leaders that learning they had lied for political gain was something new and absolutely devastating.

In Brooklyn, we could survive without the government, but we knew that at its best, it sure could help. Whether it was the safety offered to us kids by a caring police officer or the comfort our parents got in knowing that Social Security would be there when they retired—the government mattered and it was a good thing.

Now, after working for seven years at school and working in campaigns all over the Northeast, I wanted to be part of it. At home. Not as an avocation, as I had initially thought after that McCarthy campaign, but as my life's work—helping make things a little better for my parents, my friends' parents and all the families like them. I believed in them and wanted to serve them. To me, the life of a corporate lawyer seemed hardly different from running a mimeo; government was where I wanted to be.

Three aspects of public service swept me up in a tide that neither my parents nor I had a chance of fighting against: The excitement, which I had sought since my days in the mimeo room; the opportunity to do good, which I had experienced with the Young Democrats; and the chance to work for the people I most identified with, which is what I had craved doing while I was away at school.

My parents and I argued all the way to Brooklyn. When we got there, I stayed in the race.

My first election night, in September 1974, was probably the hardest of my career. When the polls closed, I had no idea what was going to happen—in part because my mother had told all her friends to vote against me!

Throughout my next thirty years in elective office, I was never again personally involved in a campaign in which I did not know the outcome by the time the polls closed.

Until 2006.

**“How's it look?”** I was on the phone with J.B. again.

“Missouri's good. Montana should be. Rhode Island's a win.”

In Rhode Island, the Democratic candidate Sheldon Whitehouse was proving that even the most moderate Republican in the Senate, Lincoln Chafee, could not survive Bush's unpopularity. If Missouri, Montana and Rhode Island held, that would be three more pickups.

“Tennessee and Virginia?” We would still need one of them to take the majority.

“I don't think Ford can pull it off.” Harold Ford, a moderate Democrat and a brilliant candidate, who would be the first African-

American senator elected in the South since Reconstruction. We had put everything we could into the contest, but he had been behind in polls for a couple of weeks.

“Virginia’s not so good either,” J.B. continued. Incumbent Republican George Allen, who only months before was considered a possible Republican presidential candidate, was holding on for dear life after a series of incidents that cast him as racially insensitive. The challenger, Jim Webb, was a former Republican and Reagan administration official who had spent his life working with the military. “It’s close, but I don’t think Webb can do it.”

I hung up and sat down heavily on the couch. Wolf Blitzer on CNN slid Rhode Island into our column. The pundits weren’t yet talking about it, but I knew that the whole night would come down to one state. “Virginia!” I called out, to no one in particular.

“Webb’s down eleven thousand,” someone answered. “Can we go over your speech?”

I leaned back and sighed. “Not now.” We had won seats, but it looked like we were going to miss the majority by a couple of thousand votes. I was disconsolate. I don’t play to lose.

A little while later, Harry Reid, the Senate Democrats’ unflappable leader, and I were led by the Capitol Police through two hotel kitchens and down the room service elevator to a holding room. There, we met up with our House counterparts, Representatives Nancy Pelosi and Rahm Emanuel. They had won back the House and were exuberant. Harry and I put on our game faces. We congratulated them—they deserved it—and chatted with other members of Congress who had gathered. An aide and I huddled in the corner and looked at my speech for the first time, but my heart wasn’t in it. I stuffed the papers in my jacket pocket—I could wing it. “Don’t forget,” he whispered as I walked away, “it’s still a great night.”

The other members of Congress and I were led to the edge of the stage. As we waited to be introduced, I looked out. The room was packed.

Suddenly, the crowd erupted. I figured they were cheering for Nancy, who was set to become the first female Speaker of the House.

I turned to Harry, but he was staring at the TV screen behind the

stage. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung slightly open. I glanced at the screen. CNN was showing Virginia results. Guess they called it for Allen, I thought. Then I looked more closely.

*Webb was up!*

I did a double take. Webb was up! That's why they were cheering! With more than 90% of precincts reporting, Webb had gotten an edge—a couple of thousand votes—on Allen!

Harry and I slapped five and, with Rahm Emanuel by my side, I bounded onto the stage. For the first time all night, I really thought we might have a chance.

As Harry Reid and I stayed up in his hotel room watching returns into the early hours of the morning, it became clear that we would hold every Democratic Senate seat, including Washington and Maryland, where we felt challenged—both Maria Cantwell and Ben Cardin finished strong. In addition, J.B.'s positive predictions in Rhode Island and Missouri proved to be true. The one disappointment of the night was watching Harold Ford deliver a heartfelt concession speech in Tennessee.

By the time dawn broke, the balance of power in the Senate came down to nine thousand votes—seven thousand, out of more than two million cast, in Virginia and two thousand in Montana.

Four down. Two to go.

Two days later, on Thursday, November 9, George Allen and Conrad Burns, the Republican incumbents in Virginia and Montana, respectively, seeing the writing on the wall, conceded.

Six down. We had the majority! It seemed somehow appropriate that as a new majority dawned for Senate Democrats, two candidates who had been propelled by the growing “netroots” (Democratic-leaning bloggers), had made the difference in the end.

Of course, we did not just pick up the Senate and, thanks to Rahm's able stewardship, the House. We also picked up governorships and state legislatures across the country.

Just like 1974, election night 2006 was a great night for Democrats.

**While trying to get some sleep** a few days after the final results came in, I felt a familiar unease settling over me. As well as we had done, I

was worried that the party I had grown up in, and in which I had a newly prominent role, would misinterpret the results. Just as Bush's reelection in 2004 was not the mandate that he claimed it was, Democrats' impressive victories in 2006 were not the sign of a lasting Democratic majority. If those eleven thousand voters (nine thousand in Virginia and two thousand in Montana), out of the millions who had cast their ballots, had made a different choice on election night, it would have been a good night—a four-seat pickup—but we would still have been the minority party.

As the celebration continued and newly emboldened Democrats strode across the country proudly proclaiming our party's rebirth, it seemed that in the euphoria we were forgetting a critical truth about the election: It *was* a great night for the Democrats, but mostly because it was such a tough year for the country—and because George W. Bush was stubborn and intransigent.

From the beginning, Harry Reid and I knew that 75% of the election would be about Bush and 25% would be about us. In the end, we played our 25% well and they played their 75% terribly. We recruited great candidates, spoke to the middle class and drew a sharp contrast with Bush's failures—from the continuing violence in Iraq, to the Republicans' culture of corruption, to Bush's assertions about the economy that were out of touch with the nagging financial concerns of most Americans. But nevertheless, the overwhelming reason for our victory was that Bush had screwed up.

In 2006, Republicans' mistakes and our campaigns made a lot of voters willing to consider Democrats, but in 2008 and beyond, we won't have George W. Bush or Tom DeLay to kick around anymore. It seemed obvious to me that the next couple of elections will be much more about what the Democratic Party offers; we will have to show voters why they should stick with us. Even if we are able to recruit the best candidates and raise more money again, it all too likely won't be enough. Unless we build on our values to generate better ideas, sharper policies and a clearer vision, we will be in trouble. Unless we are able to answer the question that Democrats are always asked—"What does the Democrat Party stand for?"—voters will go right back to voting for the Republican Party they have been supporting for the last twenty-five years.

Our victory was well deserved, but the Democratic Party still needs a new paradigm.

About a year before the election, during a particularly frustrating Democratic issues meeting—periodic gatherings of party leaders and strategists to help decide what the Democratic platform should be—a realization hit home. The meetings were always full of smart and dedicated people, each of whom I’m sure could have generated powerful and important ideas on his or her own. But the product of the meetings too often turned into pablum—big ideas were made small; tough choices were made weak; bold plans were made timid. A lot of our best stuff was drowned in a sea of consensus.

In this particular meeting, we were talking about energy independence. Of course, it was suggested that the Democratic platform should include higher CAFE standards. Short for *corporate average fuel economy* and pronounced *café*, these are the fuel-efficiency standards that are set for car companies. Raising CAFE standards should be a no-brainer for Democrats—it would save people money at the pump, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and help the environment.

“Let’s do it!” I said. “It’s a win, win, win.”

“Hang on,” someone stood up. “We can’t do that. In Michigan, we depend on car companies and the United Auto Workers. They’re against this. If CAFE standards are included, we’ll walk out.” So, CAFE standards were taken out. I left the meeting disturbed and pessimistic.

At these issues meetings, we were able to come up with some specific, trenchant proposals—raising the minimum wage, making college tuition tax deductible—that were meaningful and important and could win consensus in 2006. We rode them to victory against Bush, when voters just needed a feel for how we would govern. But they did not answer the essential question—what do Democrats stand for? Almost every Democrat, in every corner of the country, is still asked this question almost every day.

In 2008 and beyond, a greater percentage of the electorate will focus on our vision. We will need to be clearer, bolder, broader and more specific. In those meetings, I saw that it is just not possible by consensus.

The last time a political party created a new and successful model was in 1994. That year, Newt Gingrich did it with the Contract

with America. After the meeting on CAFE standards, I kept asking myself, how did he do it? I wrestled with this conundrum for weeks. And then I had an epiphany. Newt Gingrich's Contract with America was not created as a consensus document of the Republican Party; it was the manifesto of a renegade who was trying to shake up his own party. It was aimed far more at Republicans than at Democrats—more at Bob Michel than at Bill Clinton. I became convinced that instead of calibrating our direction with careful tactical decisions made in private gatherings, the solution was to take a vision—a set of ideas uncompromised by countless chefs, each adding his or her favored spirit to the brew—present it to the public and see how it fared. If it caught on, the party would respond. If not, someone else would present a better one.

That's why I wrote this book.

For years, whenever friends or colleagues had suggested I write a book on the 1994 battle for gun control or my 1998 race against Senator Alfonse D'Amato for instance, I had demurred. But while sitting in that meeting watching the Democratic platform being whittled down, I decided to give it a shot. I had no ambition to create our entire vision on my own, nor any illusion that I alone could define a new paradigm. But I did have ideas and a perspective that I wanted to share. And I knew they would never make it out of those meetings intact.

I wrote this book, which is a reflection of my own particular perspective and vision, to try and help move the Democratic Party in the right direction. While I certainly do not have all the answers—I'm not even sure of all the questions—I feel that my background and my thirty years in politics give me a unique perspective that I yearn to share with my party and my fellow Americans.

Much of this book was written before election night 2006. But I am convinced that it is even more relevant now than it was when I started—after 2006, people are more open to our message. If Democrats hope to expand our razor-thin majority, if we want to win back the White House, if we dream of turning Democratic values into a paradigm and platform that will make our party the majority party for a generation, we have a long, long way to go. Bush's failures inspired Americans in blue, purple and red states to give us a chance. But now that we control Congress and because a presidential

election with no incumbent is approaching, the onus is on us. Saying that we can do better is no longer enough—now we must prove it. In the wake of our victory, the Democratic Party needs additional ideas and policies even more than we did before we won.

In 2008 we must be able to respond to the question that we have not been able to answer sufficiently since Bill Clinton was on the top of our ticket in the mid-nineties: *What do Democrats really stand for?*

As I finally fell asleep that night, I was as convinced as ever that it was time to introduce my party and my country to some old friends—the same friends I came home to after graduating from law school.

So, without further ado, I'd like you to meet Joe and Eileen Bailey.