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Fall 2009

Kinky Friedman Meets the Press

Kinky Friedman's 2006 Texas gubernatorial campaign was nothing short of unique. After all, how often does a 62-year-old country singer/humorist run for the top office in the second-largest state in the Union – cowboy hat, duster, and trademark cigar in tow? By positioning himself as a straight-talking Independent candidate with no loyalties to lobbyists or corporate interests, Friedman was able to appeal to disaffected voters who were ready for an alternative to career politicians. In doing so, his campaign attracted considerable media attention from across the state and around the country. Everyone, it seemed, wanted a piece of Kinky. Yet just as his campaign was propelled by media coverage, so too was it ultimately brought down by media scrutiny of Friedman's shortcomings. It was a one-of-a kind 21st century campaign, and one that couldn't have happened anywhere else but in Texas.

In February of 2005, Richard "Kinky" Friedman announced his candidacy for governor in front of the Alamo – a carefully chosen location for a man who revels in proclaiming his fierce and unrelenting independence. The event was covered live on television by the MSNBC network. Shortly thereafter, it was covered by countless other media outlets, including National Public Radio.

One NPR listener who took note of the report on Friedman's announcement was Laura Stromberg, a University of Texas journalism major who had worked as a reporter and public relations specialist. Although Stromberg had family friends who were acquainted with Friedman, she had never met the candidate. But she was so intrigued by what she heard from

Friedman that, moments later, she was on the phone trying to get in touch with him about volunteering.

In the ragtag chaos of the nascent Friedman for Governor Campaign, Stromberg moved up the ranks quickly. Five weeks after the Alamo announcement, she had gone from unpaid campaign volunteer to full-time campaign press secretary. Drawing upon her journalism and PR background, she was given the task of coordinating efforts to present Friedman to the media as a serious and viable candidate, and of handling any potential fallout from admissions about his colorful past.

“In terms of dealing with the press at first, there was a lot of inoculation going on,” Stromberg said. “Meaning that Kinky, our campaign manager and myself all decided right off the bat that Kinky had a ton of skeletons in his closet, and rather than wait for an October surprise we would bring them out of the closet early on so that no one could say, ‘Oh my God! Kinky did drugs in the 70s and 80’s!’ Or, ‘Oh my God, did you know he used to use the ‘N’ word in his song lyrics?’”

This so-called “inoculation strategy” was employed by Friedman and his staff almost from the beginning, recalled Wayne Slater, a Dallas Morning News political reporter who covered the campaign.

“I did see him early on make very public statements about using cocaine in the past, and drinking a lot in the past, and living a certain life of a musician,” Slater said. “So that inoculation strategy is almost always a very good strategy for politicians, and they used it, by talking about ‘sure he’s crazy, he’s done crazy things, he’s done illegal drugs, and he’s done this and he’s done that.’ And I think that did work, to the extent that it was going to work.”

Friedman's team believed they could work around concerns about the candidate's past, but how would they persuade the public to vote for him in a crowded field of candidates that included incumbent Rick Perry and former U.S. Representative Chris Bell? As Friedman himself liked to point out, he would have been the first independent candidate elected to the governorship since Sam Houston in 1859. But Friedman would not be alone in his bid to win as an independent.

In January of 2006 – 11 months after Friedman's announcement at the Alamo – State Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn announced that she, too, would enter the race as an Independent. Despite running in past campaigns as a Republican, Strayhorn opted to get her name on the ballot as an Independent to avoid facing Perry in a primary contest. For some observers, Strayhorn's decision was bad news for the Friedman campaign. But, according to Slater, Friedman did not necessarily see it this way.

"Kinky was here, and this was before the full field had emerged," Slater said. "And I asked him, 'What happens if Carole Strayhorn gets in as an Independent?' And Kinky says, 'Well that would be fine...' and so forth, and it was clear to me as I talked to him that he did not have the kind of experience or political insight to know if there was another Independent candidate, with a name in the race, he was dead. I mean, it would absolutely kill him, and probably kill the other candidate as well. So my first impression was how politically naïve he was in terms of traditional politics."

It was this political naïveté that the Friedman campaign staff hoped to turn into an asset as the campaign began in earnest. For a time, their strategy seemed to be working. By May, the campaign had collected nearly 170,000 signatures from voters who, due to the provisions of

Texas election law, had stayed out of party primaries and “saved themselves” for Friedman – more than three times the required number. And the number of campaign volunteers – and the very campaign itself – had grown by leaps and bounds, according to Stromberg.

“A year and a half later, fast forward, we have this enormous warehouse with about 35 staff and hundreds of volunteers,” Stromberg said. “Thousands of volunteers, really, but dozens coming in and out of the office every day in Austin, it’s safe to say. So we went from a campaign manager, myself and an office manager...to 30-plus employees. You know, from 300 square feet to a warehouse. So right there the juxtaposition was pretty extreme.”

Leading the campaign was a man well-known for his work with outsider candidates. Dean Barkley, who served as Friedman’s campaign director and chief strategist, had helped engineer the campaign of professional wrestler-turned-Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura by bringing hundreds of thousands of new voters to the polls on Election Day. In fact, the Ventura campaign seemed to serve as a model for Friedman’s potential success in Texas. Ventura himself even appeared with Friedman at some Friedman campaign events. But applying the Jesse Ventura campaign strategy to Texas was problematic, said Slater.

“A Jesse Ventura approach simply was never going to work in Texas,” Slater said. “They had certain laws that allowed the kind of voting that would sweep somebody in, like a third party candidate. The Jesse Ventura model in Minnesota basically said a bunch of people just show up, and the third party candidate wins. The problem with that is our laws are different than Minnesota’s. In terms of registration and same-day voting, we just don’t have that in Texas. That just wasn’t going to happen.”

As the campaign progressed and media attention grew, Friedman's outsider status also became something of a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he received an amount of free coverage usually reserved for Hollywood actors and rock stars. From *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* to *60 Minutes* and even his own reality show on the Country Music Television network, Friedman was seemingly everywhere. As newspaper veterans like to say, the story was good copy.

But Friedman's tendency to speak his mind in an unscripted manner and attempt to answer any question posed to him – combined with the non-stop campaign events he held across the state – began to get the candidate into some hot water, and reporters were there to cover each slip of the tongue. Stromberg said campaign staffers were conscious of this concern, but reluctant to act on it.

“I think there was this push-pull thing going on – especially with the people who were closest to him and who were around him the most – in that you didn't want them to change the essence of Kinky, but you kind of wished he'd bite his tongue or prepare a little bit more,” said Stromberg. “It was tough. I mean, you didn't want to change him. You were a fan or a supporter or a staff member or a volunteer because of who he was. But the very things you loved about him were the things that got him into trouble.”

The relationship between Friedman and the media was strained at times. Although the campaign made a concerted effort to hold regular press conferences and interview sessions, reporters did not always like the answers they got from Friedman. Austin American-Statesman political columnist W. Gardner Selby recalled one interview with Friedman during the summer

of 2006 that didn't go as planned. As Selby pressed Friedman for specific policy details, the candidate grew restless.

"I tried to pin him down on what he really believed about certain issues," Selby said. "And he got so tired of my questions that he reached out and sort of playfully choked me on a sidewalk outside of a restaurant in East Austin. [Friedman said] 'I'd like to kill you,' or something like that. He did not say 'kill,' but he was trying to make a point that he was frustrated by the questioning and irritated by it."

Although Selby and Stromberg both recall the event as being playful in nature, it serves to highlight the animosity Friedman occasionally expressed towards members of the press when things didn't go his way on the campaign trail. According to Slater, Friedman may have been unprepared to handle the media onslaught.

"Over time he learned that the political media offer up criticism, and will quote your opponent, who will say things about you," Slater said. "And he never really liked that. I think he really had a thin skin for a politician – often new politicians do – but he had very thin skin. So I think his relationship with the media was a mixed one, where he recognized he needed free media...but I sensed as the campaign wore on he was a bit more prickly, a bit more difficult, and somewhat more hostile in his attitude or dislike of the media. "

For her part, Stromberg said she felt that reporters had a fairly accurate understanding of Friedman and his candidacy.

"I think the press really knew him," Stromberg said. "He gave them access to pretty much everything. He wasn't a closed off candidate; he was a very open candidate. I have no doubt that the press knew him, they liked him, [and] they had their problems with him. They

didn't think he was taking the race seriously enough. But they believed he was a serious candidate."

The issue of whether or not Friedman's candidacy could be taken seriously is one that lingers to this day. Friedman's eagerness to market his books, records, cigars, salsas, and his own personal brand have led some to label his campaign as little more than a publicity stunt. The candidate himself seemed to bristle at this notion, contending that it was unfair to single him out for such questions. However, it was a valid criticism in the eyes of some campaign reporters.

"From the beginning to the end, I tended to view his campaign as much a marketing program as it was a political campaign," said Slater. "Now the truth is there are a lot of similarities between political campaigns and marketing. In this case, it was clear that Kinky was in part marketing himself...his persona, really, and was using this to do it. But I'm not so cynical to believe that's all this was."

Slater notwithstanding, Stromberg said she believed that the campaign team was able to successfully convince the press, if not the voters, that Friedman was a credible candidate.

"The general public was never really sure whether he was serious," Stromberg said. "But I have no doubt that after many, many one-on-one breakfasts and coffees and lunches with reporters, most believed he ran sincerely – believed he wanted to make a difference. Whereas a lot of people in the public think that he ran to boost his sales or because he wanted the attention. None of that was true and I think we managed to convince the press pretty early on that he was serious."

When Friedman did make policy announcements, such as those involving healthcare and immigration, the political press covered them fairly, said Austin American-Statesman political reporter Corrie MacLaggan.

“He was entertaining, but I don’t think that means we didn’t listen to what he had to say,” MacLaggan said. “If you go back and look at my stories, I think I wrote a story about his health proposals and – I can joke around with you about how he’s entertaining and he’s this comedian and all that – but I think we paid attention to what he was saying policy-wise. And he had some serious proposals and some serious people backing him.”

The focus may have been on policy issues at that time, but Friedman’s missteps as Election Day drew closer arguably became the enduring issue of his campaign. By September, traditional and online media outlets had latched on to a controversial statement he made to reporters about Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Houston. The honeymoon, it seemed, was over, and the feeling seemed to be mutual.

“I think that they treated him very, very well in the beginning,” Stromberg said of the press. “And I think by the time he basically botched the debate and came out with his Katrina gaffes about ‘crackheads and thugs,’ the tables turned on him.”

Stromberg notes that the month of September was an exceedingly bad one for the Friedman campaign. The Katrina statement immediately brought accusations of racism, and bloggers, in particular, seemed ready to pile on. Decades-old statements from interviews and books were put forth as further evidence of Friedman’s alleged racism. And on September 21, things got even worse.

On that day, the left-leaning web site Burnt Orange Report posted a brief audio clip of Friedman performing a comedy routine at a Houston nightclub in 1980, under the headline “Kinky’s Latest Racist Slur: Ni**er Eggs.” (Martin, 2006) In the 12-second clip, Friedman is twice heard using that racial slur. The site had no response from Friedman or his campaign staff, and provided no information about the source of the audio clip or why it had surfaced at that particular moment. However, the clip only fueled the charges of racism, leading to multiple stories in media outlets from around the state.

To Slater, the Burnt Orange Report blog post and ensuing controversy were indicative of a phenomenon exclusive to political journalism in the digital age.

“I think it’s absolutely 21st-Century,” he said. “Had I written in a newspaper a portion of that routine, it would not have had the same power of being able to actually hear it. How could you have heard this routine twenty years ago? There’s the ability of just one person in a room, or in this case a fairly small very active group of Democratic young people, who were able to post that and lots of voters, certainly lots of people who Kinky needed, could hear it. That never could have happened years ago.”

Stromberg and the Friedman campaign staff countered that the clip was taken out of context, and that it was nearly three decades old. In short, they said, it was nothing the press shouldn’t have known about already.

“I think it was one of those typical October surprise things that the press just jumps on,” said Stromberg. “I think it’s unfortunate because it wasn’t new to a lot of the people who wrote about it – Gardner Selby in particular, at the Statesman. I mean, he was very familiar with Kinky’s work and yet he’s one of the first people to jump on the story when the Burnt Orange

Report posted its blog post that made the rounds and got the whole thing going. So it was a little surprising.”

The gubernatorial campaign’s one and only debate occurred in October, and it, too, was a setback back for Friedman. The issue of race was front and center, as Friedman attempted to answer criticism about his past remarks and was unable to answer a question from Slater – who served on the debate’s journalist panel – about how many African Americans or Hispanics worked on his campaign. His performance was roundly criticized, even by his friend and self-described hero, the late Molly Ivins.

“Lots of people are voting for Kinky for the fun of it, but the thin-skinned Texas Jew reacted badly to questions about his recent racist remarks,” Ivins wrote of the debate. “He first became defensive and then petulant – sort of, ‘if you can’t take a joke, to hell with you.’ The politically incorrect humor didn’t work because it wasn’t funny...in fact, it was painfully bad.” (Ivins, 2006)

Following the debate, Democratic candidate Bell’s poll numbers rose to put him in second place – directly behind frontrunner Perry – but Friedman’s numbers took a serious hit. According to Stromberg, there were two main explanations for the debate performance.

“It was stubborn unwillingness to prepare and it was that he literally he got nervous,” she said. “I mean he was nervous. I’ve never seen him look or act so nervous before. I don’t think he prepared because I don’t think he expected to be that nervous. If there had been multiple debates and he had crashed and burned the way he did in the first one, I guarantee he would have studied up a little more.”

With Election Day fast approaching and the Friedman seemingly self-destructing, the staff largely felt powerless, Stromberg said. The poll numbers gradually got worse, and the media seemed to be dismissing Friedman's chances of making a strong showing. In the eyes of some, he was damaged goods. The non-politician who hoped to shake up the system had fallen prey to its machinery.

"Oh, we were horrified," Stromberg said. "We were all horrified. There was nothing we could do to stop it. It was like watching a train wreck in slow motion. And it's not like it happened all at once. It wasn't like our numbers plummeted in one night but they dropped very slowly over a four or five, six week period. And it was horrifying to watch. A lot of us put a lot of time and love and money into that campaign."

When Election Day finally arrived in November, some 21 months after Friedman's Alamo declaration, the Kinky Friedman for Governor Campaign didn't stand a chance. Since new Texas voters were required to have registered weeks earlier, the Jesse Ventura strategy was out. And the racism allegations had siphoned away much of Friedman's support base, said Slater.

"Some young progressives, young people especially, who otherwise would have liked him, felt uncomfortable [with the racism allegations]," Slater said. "So that left basically some hippie-dippies, burn-outs, and rednecks, and that's about what he got."

In the end, Friedman received 12 percent of the vote, finishing in fourth place behind Perry, Bell, and Strayhorn, respectively. For Friedman staff and volunteers, it was a disappointing finish to a campaign that had gotten off to a promising start. But for her part, Stromberg said she has no regrets about the way the campaign was run.

“We were all amateurs and we were all winging it and we did a pretty good job, all things considered,” Stromberg said. “I mean, the person who really messed up that race was Kinky. His staff was fantastic – myself included.”

Friedman himself continued to express frustration with the way he was portrayed by the media. As captured by a documentary film crew who followed him on Election Day, Friedman made his thoughts on the political press quite clear, recalls Selby.

“There’s a part of the end of the documentary that is very vivid,” Selby said. “[Friedman] is overheard on election night telling his aides that he doesn’t want to deal with the media, that they had screwed him, that he was sick of them, and that he wasn’t going to deal with reporters anymore. And that seems reasonable on his part. He was upset.”

For Stromberg, life has moved on since the election. No longer involved in campaigning, she now serves as communications director for the Texas chapter of the National Federation of Independent Business, a nonprofit group. But she still has an interest in politics, and said she would consider returning to it for the right candidate. Her political outlook was forever changed by her campaign experience, however.

“Unfortunately what I did take [from the experience] is that the system is just bad as a system, and there’s a certain way that you go about doing things if you want to be a part of it,” she said. “And if you don’t then you’re not a part of it. Not too many people have been able to buck that system.”

Friedman has announced another gubernatorial run in 2010 – this time as a Democrat. But Stromberg declined his request to be involved with that campaign. In fact, the two haven't seen each other in more than a year and generally do not keep in touch, Stromberg said. She makes it clear that she does not believe he should run again.

"I don't think he's learned anything," said Stromberg. "I don't think he's changed. It's not just that he's not polished, but being more polished would have been a start. Being more up to speed on issues would have been a start. I think he made a huge mistake running as an Independent and basing the entire crux of his campaign on the two-party system being broken, and [now] to run as a Democrat...I think it's one of many, many mistakes he's made and will probably continue to make."

"I think there was an opportunity in '06," she added. "There was more of an opportunity for that perfect storm and if it didn't happen then, it won't happen now. It could have happened then. I don't think there's a snowball's chance in hell it could happen now."

Works Cited

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