

Meandering Toward A Destination Certain

The Ex-Senator Examines His Life - Part 6 of 6

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Author: Barton Gellman, Dale Russakoff

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In March 1997, Bill Bradley, two months retired from the Senate, strolled into the San Francisco office of an Internet start-up called ThirdAge.com. Amid empty computer boxes, beanbag chairs and “desks” made of doors atop sawhorses, he listened with fascination as Mary Furlong explained her burgeoning virtual community of men and women ages 45 to 59, all seeking new meaning in what Furlong called Third Age - after a first career, after raising children.

“Boomers are defining themselves anew as they turn 50, and they’re all getting wired,” Furlong said. “In Third Age, you master the things you care most about. You shed some things you were before.”

“Well, I’m in my Third Age!” Bradley exclaimed, as if someone had just explained him to himself. “I was a basketball player, I was a senator. Now I’m trying to figure out what to do with my life.”

As usual, he wasn’t revealing much. He knew what he wanted to do with his life: He wanted to run for president in 2000, and he had two years to lay the groundwork. He also had some questions to answer about the information revolution - how it was fueling the national economy, then how it could fuel his campaign. Furlong was one of hundreds of entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, investors, lawyers and engineers he met with, asking about their work, their lives, their dreams. Many wondered, inevitably, about Bradley’s dreams.

“I’ve left the Senate but not public life,” he would say, opaquely and invariably.

For Bradley, the seemingly short climb from wanting to run to actually running was Everest-like. He began as he had every task in his life - methodically, setting goals: Build a governing team, learn the country, master foreign policy, find his speaking voice. In late 1991, he thought he had reached the summit, only to discover another hill. He added a fifth goal: self-knowledge.

Bradley’s emotional trials in the 1990s - the one regimen he didn’t script - became his guide. The decade began with a brush with political mortality, his near-defeat for reelection in New Jersey by an unknown Christine Todd Whitman. In the same period, he lost two close college friends to suicide, a third to liver cancer. By mid- decade, Warren and Susie Bradley were gone, too. Bradley planned the funerals for his parents down to the last song - “Ol’ Man River” for his contemplative father in 1994, “Rock of Ages” for his unsinkable mother in 1995. He buried both in Crystal City, Mo., where he was born and raised.

Through it all, Bradley spent most weeks in Washington and was the primary parent - his wife, Ernestine, taught in New Jersey - to an adolescent daughter, Theresa Anne, now 23, who gave her father something of an emotional trial by fire, according to friends who talked him through it.

Most transforming of all was Ernestine Bradley’s breast cancer. She found a lump in the spring of 1992 and was diagnosed in June, after the wedding of her daughter Stephanie, from her first marriage.

Rigorously independent in all other ways, Ernestine Bradley relied totally on her husband to manage her care. She said she was too frightened to listen effectively in meeting after meeting with her doctors. She

may have been the scholar, but he did the research. He chose the surgeon, the oncologist, the hospitals, the treatment regime. He drove her to and from each chemotherapy session.

“I think this was Bill’s way of dealing with the trauma,” Ernestine Bradley said in an interview. “He became the great expert.” After a double mastectomy and a trying struggle through chemotherapy, she has tested cancer-free.

“If you want to say one thing blew him out of the water, it was Ernestine’s cancer,” said Carol Cunningham, Bradley’s lifelong friend and next-door neighbor in Crystal City, Mo. “You expect your parents to die. Ernestine was his partner, and she wasn’t supposed to have problems.”

Bradley said he now believes his wife’s cancer, and her survival, led inexorably to his presidential candidacy.

“You never know when it’s over,” he said in an interview. “This was a moment to take stock. This is it. Quit absorbing. You’ll absorb so much but it could all be over tomorrow. Then you’ll have all these things absorbed but you’ll be a corpse.”

Bradley had written “Life on the Run” in the mid-1970s as he decided to leave basketball for politics. Now, at 50, with his wife recovering, he turned to writing again - in this case, a Senate memoir, “Time Present, Time Past.” He finished in August 1995, as he announced he was leaving the Senate, declaring politics “broken.”

The book, according to friends and aides, became Bradley’s vehicle for working out how much of his obsessive privacy - his lifelong defense against celebrity - to surrender as a presidential candidate. He wrote of his father’s crippling arthritis, his mother’s force of will, his youthful experimentation with marijuana, his German father-in-law’s role in the Luftwaffe in World War II, his Senate friends and foes.

“Reporters say to me, ‘My God, he laid it all out,’ “ said a senior campaign official. “They don’t realize that what he did was draw the line.”

Still, friends and former aides have watched in disbelief as Bradley has lowered his famous privacy wall - talking with apparent ease about his wife’s mastectomy, or the suicides of friends, or how he maintains his deceased parents’ home. “His sense of privacy, it’s almost an obsession,” Cunningham said. “His father, I don’t understand that he hasn’t risen from the grave.”

Lisbeth Pettengill, Bradley’s Senate press secretary in the 1980s, gauged his surrender of control in deeply personal terms. She had a miscarriage back then, and he placed a less-than-satisfying condolence call. “He said, ‘I know how you feel, but you know, it’s for the best,’ “ she said. “I just exploded: ‘YOU know how I feel? You’re a Rhodes scholar! You won an Olympic gold medal! You were an NBA star! You’re a senator! You’ve never lost anything in your life!

“I was hormonal, of course,” she recalled. “But I don’t think he understood what it meant to lose something so precious. He sure couldn’t show it.” Last year, Pettengill lost her husband to cancer, a decade after leaving Bradley’s staff and his orbit. To her surprise, a handwritten note arrived from her former boss, this time offering no rules to live by - only empathy and acceptance.

“Some things just are,” he wrote.

Down in the Valley

On one level, Bradley's flight from Washington, followed by a campaign for the presidency, repeated a life pattern. In 1965, graduating from Princeton amid a tide of celebrity, he declared himself through with basketball, only to sign with the New York Knicks upon returning from two idyllic, anonymous years as a Rhodes scholar.

Again, he removed himself from the fray to reflect on what he wanted. His latest sabbatical in ways resembled a smorgasbord of almost everything Bradley had wanted to sample before he became president. He wrote, reflected, found a basketball team (*Stanford '97*) that reminded him of his 1960s Princeton Tigers, caught up with friends, tried television commentary (he fell flat) and took long drives in his 1985 Oldsmobile, his favorite place to think.

On another level, what he did in 1997 and 1998 seemed designed to lay the groundwork for his campaign. He secured appointments at universities with maximum geographic distribution - the University of Maryland in the East, Notre Dame in the heartland, Stanford out West - where he lectured and led conferences on health, race, children, leadership and foreign policy, issues at the core of his candidacy.

He also cashed in on his national prominence to the tune of more than \$2 million. This included \$1.6 million in speaking fees from banking, insurance, health, high-tech, communications and real estate interests and \$430,000 consulting for J.P. Morgan, Morgan Guaranty and the Gartner Group, a technology services company.

In addition, CBS paid him \$47,000 as a commentator on the weekend news, although his rosy riffs on old veterans and unforgettable teachers were judged "a little soft" for a news show and were dropped after a year, according to CBS News President Andrew Heyward.

Through all this talking, Bradley was confronting a perennial weakness - communicating. Personable and funny in small groups, he rarely managed either on the stump. "It comes from going out on the road as if you were a musician, playing the small clubs until you got it down," he concluded in "Time Present, Time Past."

He had tried just about everything else. In the Senate, he used two speech consultants. He studied great communicators, holing up at one point with Elvis Presley films in the Library of Congress.

"He wanted to analyze Elvis's charisma, how he connected with the American people," recalled Pettengill, whom he dragged along. "He asked if I thought Elvis's gospel background helped him reach people at a visceral level. I'd say, 'Bill, this isn't going to happen. I hate Elvis.' He kept watching."

A breakthrough came when his friend and supporter Herbert Allen, the mega-investor, matched him with film director and actor Sydney Pollack, who told him to forget the scripts and play himself.

"The only work I ever did was to come in when he was getting ready for a speech and ask him what it meant to him," Pollack said. "'Who are you and what are you talking about? Let us know. Let us see that.' I believe that made sense to him in a way all the other stuff didn't. I think what people are responding to in him is the exact opposite of playing a part."

Bradley had told his Princeton roommate and close friend, Dan Okimoto, a Stanford professor of political science, that he felt he couldn't lead the country unless he understood the information revolution. Bradley already knew members of the high-tech establishment; he and Okimoto had been inviting them since the early days of the computer chip to a U.S.-Japan legislators' dialogue. Now Bradley wanted to meet a rising

generation of leaders. Okimoto helped arrange the appointment at Stanford, in the heart of Silicon Valley.

Princeton friends who run venture capital firms - including John Diekman of Bay City Capital and John Hummer of Hummer, Winblad - set up lunches and dinners for Bradley with chief executive officers of new companies they had funded. Friends at Wilson, Sonsini, the Valley's leading law firm, rounded up venture capitalists and entrepreneurs. Venture capitalist Ted Schlein and his sister Kathy Schlein, an investor and consultant - whose stepfather, retired federal judge Lee Sarokin, was Bradley's lawyer as a Knick - introduced him to the under-40 super-rich.

"He was extracting data. He was on a mission," said Kathy Schlein. Plenty of his dining partners were mystified. What's his position on foreign workers' visas? What about stockholder lawsuits? Is he a candidate? "I've left the Senate but not public life," he kept saying.

Back at ThirdAge.com, there emerged a method to these meanderings. After pumping Furlong for intelligence on older baby boomers' yearnings for new meaning - whether through Viagra, politics or community - he volunteered to write an online column about his own Third Age. Soon, he was a virtual voice, logging in monthly on the intimacy that came from caring for his parents, his "search for meaning beyond the material," the reward of reaching out to acquaintances facing hard times.

He called it "Bill Bradley Listening," ending with a question (*"How are you finding what is meaningful to you?"*) and an e-mail link. Only one of the columns mentioned that he had been in politics.

As it turned out, Bradley had picked a winner. Furlong's Web site now has more than 700,000 subscribers, and CBS recently bought one-third of its stock. Furlong is now one of Bradley's more avid fund-raisers. So it went throughout the Valley once Bradley declared his candidacy. Hummer, the venture capitalist, found his friend an easy sell to investors. "Venture capitalists listen to entrepreneurs all day, asking themselves, 'Is this a winner?'" Hummer said. "The big winners are the ones that change a paradigm, like the move from the desktop to the client server. These people decided [Vice President] Gore was the legacy system and Bill was the new paradigm."

It all came together in April, when Bradley held his big Bay Area fund-raiser. "The experts said we'd never break \$500,000," said John Roos, a lawyer who headed the effort. "They kept saying Gore had made 50 trips to Silicon Valley." The experts had it wrong. Bradley went home with \$1.1 million, much of it from people who never before had contributed to a presidential candidate.

Pressure and Reluctance

It seemed more than coincidence that Bradley found his voice as a candidate just as expectations of him were waning.

In late 1987, his Princeton mentor Arthur S. Link, Democratic kingmaker Harry McPherson, superlawyer Edward Bennett Williams and J.P. Morgan chairman Lou Preston had told him he owed it to his country and his party to run for president. The petitioners for 1992 included Hollywood moguls Michael Eisner and Michael Ovitz, Herbert Allen and again Link, who visited Bradley at his house on McComb Street in Washington. "I had an obligation to the country, or to 'your fellow man,'" was the way Bradley recalled Link's Calvinist instruction.

Ernestine Bradley was her husband's natural ally in resisting them. "Bill and I have often felt that we are this little army of two," she said. "People try to make sense of him in terms that would make sense to them, but in the process totally disregarding, I think - Bill would say disrespecting - who he is. You know there's

a human being who needs his own time to mature, to reflect, to grow, to reject. Leave him alone!”

Their army of two is accustomed to operating at long distance - she as a professor of comparative literature at Montclair State University; he on the run with basketball and then politics. Bradley commuted from the Senate to New Jersey on weekends until Theresa Anne was 10. “And then he said, ‘You know, I never see her enough,’” Ernestine Bradley said. Theresa Anne moved to Washington, with her mother coming down on weekends.

Bradley said he decided against running in 1992 partly because his daughter was young and his wife was writing her most ambitious book. Theresa Anne is now a student at New York University; Ernestine Bradley’s “The Language of Silence” was published last year.

But Bradley had many other sounding boards. “He’d ask himself: ‘Why am I doing this? What is my reason for wanting to run for president?’” Okimoto said. “He hasn’t wanted to run for power, fame, celebrity, other people’s expectations. He’s had to stand aside and be comfortable with his reason for doing something that seems defined by external expectations.”

“Bill felt if he ran in ‘92 he’d win. It was so hard because it seemed the time was right,” Okimoto said. “He felt it might not come again. This was when there was no clear Democratic front-runner.” Some close friends grew exasperated with his reluctance. “Some felt maybe this man is a Hamlet who’ll never make up his mind,” Okimoto said.

But, he added, “choosing not to run, for his own reasons, was a breakthrough for him. I trace his decision to run this time to his decision not to run in 1992.”

The question resurfaced briefly in the spring of 1992. Bill Clinton was about to clinch the Democratic nomination. Clinton counselor Warren Christopher asked Bradley in a confidential meeting in Philadelphia to consider the vice presidency. Political advisers told Bradley this was the surest route to becoming his party’s nominee the next time around. Bradley said he wanted only one job in the White House - the presidency.

Expectations for 2000 then passed Bradley by, for Al Gore, who chose the vice presidential route. In December 1995, at Grace Presbyterian Church in Crystal City, Mo., Bradley paid final respects to the mother who had put her stamp on him before the rest of the world tried to. “I saw the minister talking to him, and it looked to me like Bill was just shaking, but by the time he got up there he was eloquent,” said Rick Wright, Bradley’s Princeton teammate and friend. Bradley delivered one of three tributes to Susie Bradley. “What struck me was Bill’s ability to gather himself,” Wright said.

Afterward, John Anderson, a local judge, remembered asking Bradley if he would run for president. The judge said he was taken aback when Bradley looked him hard in the eye and said, “Before I die.” Bradley claims no memory of the exchange.

“It wasn’t exactly something I was thinking about at that moment. You have to respond to people,” he said. For his two years weighing a presidential run, Bradley lived half the time at home in Montclair and half in Atherton, Calif., where Princeton grad and Gap founder Don Fischer lent him an unoccupied estate. Bradley shipped his Oldsmobile west and pointed it whenever possible down “the most beautiful highway I’ve ever driven,” Route 280 from Palo Alto to Burlingame and back.

At times like these of solitude on open roads, Bradley’s vision of his campaign came into focus. He wanted to ask of America what he had asked of himself: to live as an example. He wanted the nation to face its

shortcomings - child poverty, racism, tens of millions of people without health insurance, a political system mortgaged to big money and base instincts - and right them.

“My abilities match the national moment,” he concluded.

Asked how he would lead if Congress had a different vision, Bradley responded: “Witness Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the fact that most Democrats supported his tax bill. That was because he’d won by so much and people thought maybe he knows something about politics.”

And if there is no Bradley landslide? “Then it’s a matter of building coalitions.”

Going for It

In one of his last speeches as a senator, Bradley told the story of Dorothy Bradley (no relation), a passionate public servant whom he had met at a 1986 chili roast in Billings, Mont., the state capital. She had run for governor in 1992 and lost, emerging devastated. She then retreated to a tiny apartment in faraway Ashland, teaching in a one-room school on an Indian reservation. Weighing what to do next felt to her like flying an airplane without instruments in the dark Montana sky. “I can see the Yellowstone River in the moonlight,” she said, “but I don’t know if I’m ever going to get to Billings.”

“And I thought, when she said that, isn’t that the way it is in a lot of lives?” Bradley said. “I mean, if you’ve ever had a teenaged child, are they ever going to get to Billings? If you’ve ever had your own career aspirations, well, are you ever going to get to Billings?”

Of course, Bradley’s closest friends wondered the same about him. For the Princeton circle, it had become part of life, having this friend who one day would run for president. Tom Singer, now a San Francisco psychiatrist, began raising money as soon as Bradley made his move, and last April he showed up at the hotel where his huge California fund-raiser was held.

At the back of the hall, Singer spotted Rick Wright, his and Bradley’s close friend since Princeton, now Bradley’s national fund-raising chairman. Singer went to stand beside him. The two had been in nonverbal communication with Bradley for years about this unspoken wrestling match deep inside himself: Whether to run? When to run? Do I want it? Why do I want it?

Now Bradley was making a speech, way up at the front of the hall. Behind him was a huge, blue-and-white “Bill Bradley for President” banner. It was the banner, they later agreed, that got them by the throat. Singer looked at Wright. Wright looked at Singer. Neither said a word. They didn’t have to. Each knew what the other was thinking: My God! He’s doing it!

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.

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