In the Senate, Prepping for the Presidency

Picking His Shots - Part 5 of 6

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The defining television ad of Bill Bradley's 1978 Senate campaign opened with gobs of plaster gushing into molds, producing identical little white men in suits. A disembodied hand painted the miniature men's hair brown, their suits blue, their ties red.

"Most politicians are basically alike," a generic male voice intoned. "When someone different like Bill Bradley comes along, it's worth paying attention. Bill Bradley is not tied to old ideas and ineffective solutions. He's not obligated to the special interests or controlled by one or two political cronies."

For someone who had wanted to be a senator almost half his life, candidate Bradley, at 35, betrayed little reverence for the club he was campaigning to join.

As senator-elect, he sent the same message with the staff he selected. Hundreds of Capitol Hill veterans applied to work for him, almost all men. Unmoved, Bradley selected as his first chief of staff a woman who had never worked in Washington.

"I wouldn't be hiring someone with no experience in the Senate and not from New Jersey," Marcia Aronoff, then counselor to the New York state Senate majority leader, told Bradley in her first job interview. To Bradley, those were hardly disadvantages.

"He wanted someone whose primary loyalty was to him," Aronoff recalled, "who wasn't carrying around a lot of baggage, New Jersey- or Washington-related."

Gina Despres, Bradley's first legislative counsel, was more succinct: "Bill likes virgins."

To many around him, Bradley the senator was inscrutable, but perhaps that was because they didn't know where he was heading. Almost everyone assumed he was preparing to be president from the day he arrived in Washington - in fact long before. And he was, according to more than a dozen close friends and aides, but not in accustomed ways. This wasn't as crass, in his mind, as a vote-by-vote, interest group-by-interest group positioning. This was a virtuous enterprise: qualifying himself to be president, much as he had made himself a basketball superstar through a grueling, self-imposed regimen. "Virtue rewarded in value to the game," he called it.

And as with basketball, Bradley the senator had his own syllabus, his own stages of preparedness. Even the "virgin" staffers fit into it; he wanted to find a team for the long term, committed exclusively to him. Shunning the standard legislative route of influencing major issues as Washington defined them, he spent years at a time on a few "large, structural reforms," as he called them. Every bill he championed, every speech he wrote, every book he read, every trip he took to the American heartland or the Russian hinterland - everything had a place in the self-directed education of Bill Bradley.

Asked in an interview if he had overlooked skills common to great presidents - such as old-fashioned political horse-trading and intimidation - Bradley answered: "I think that the great presidents have always been a little more clever."

What showed up on the surface during Bradley's 18 years in the Senate was highly contradictory. Having aspired to the Senate since he was too young to vote, he was never of the Senate.

He moved at the margins on most central political battles of his day - the Reagan-era military buildup, the Civil Rights Act of 1991, President Clinton's 1994 health care reform battle - not in the trenches where legislative warhorses mortgaged souls, called in chits and traded favors in search of 51 votes.

Yet when issues engaged him, he achieved improbable victories over special interests - a sweeping overhaul of the income tax system in 1986, a complex reform of western water law in 1992. His mastery of his chosen subjects was unquestioned - from Medicaid to the Russian economy. Vice President Gore summoned Bradley to help prep him in 1993 for his high-stakes debate with Ross Perot on the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Bush administration embraced his plan for addressing Third World debt.

Unfailingly modest and self-mocking in private, Bradley veered toward sanctimony in hearings and debates. As colleagues on the Finance Committee salted the tax code with breaks for everything from oil to yachts, calling them essential to jobs, he rose in punctilious opposition. "The inevitable result of shuffling all this money around is that narrow groups of taxpayers win while the rest of us lose," he would say, mantra-like, as the committee voted him down, often by 18 to 2. Or worse.

Asked why he offered so many doomed amendments, he said, "They probably had to do with trying to draw the distinction between what is and what could be."

For whose benefit? "Probably for my own sense of what was the right thing to do."

The Senate was the first arena where Bradley's style of leading by example was not universally embraced, as it had been at Princeton and on the New York Knicks. A number of past and present Senate Democrats said on the condition of anonymity that they found him arrogant. Many said they never figured him out.

"I was always intrigued with Bill Bradley," recalled a mystified David Pryor (D-Ark.). "I'd sit by him in the Finance Committee, and sometimes for one to three hours he would not say anything, just take notes, volumes of notes. I never quite knew if he was writing notes about testimony, or questions, or whether he was writing his diary."

Bradley's longtime Princeton friend Tom Singer, a San Francisco psychiatrist, said Bradley probably confounded colleagues because he "thinks from the inside out." The average politician, by contrast, is an extrovert, Singer said, calibrated to people and situations on the outside.

"They can't read it," Singer said. "They project all sorts of dark things onto it - he's positioning, he's calculating, he's high and mighty, he's sanctimonious - when really what he's doing is preparing himself according to his own criteria. This is Bill from the day I met him. He sets a goal, and prepares to meet it."

A New Arena

Bradley arrived in Washington with two major goals. He wanted to reform the tax system, which he had viewed as a rigged game since his Knicks agent taught him how the rich shelter their incomes from taxes. And he wanted to tackle the energy crisis, then unnerving the nation with gas lines and global tension. He sought and won assignments on the Finance and Energy committees.

But Aronoff said there was another motive: He wanted to study the two committee chairmen, both samurais

of legislating - Russell Long of Finance and Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Energy. In an interview last month, Bradley spoke of Long's virtuosity with the awe he once reserved for basketball's Oscar Robertson: "He could put things together and smile and make everybody laugh, and at the same time, at the end of the day you realized you had air in your hand but you felt good. And he'd won!"

But Bradley never intended to deploy these skills as Long did. From the beginning, Aronoff said, he resolved to master one or two complex, important issues over a period of years. "He said the most urgent issues weren't always most important," Aronoff said. "If you put one-tenth of your energy in 10 places, you'll gain one inch on each one. People begin to think government can't do anything because they never see a problem there's real progress on."

Bradley seemed determined at first to shed his basketball celebrity. A member of the United States Senate, he would say, does not win respect in short pants. Once, at a Finance Committee hearing on counterfeit imports, anticipation built as one of the exhibits - a contraband basketball - was passed toward the former superstar. "We thought he'd do something fancy," recalled a former committee staffer. "He passed it on like it was a dirty diaper."

Bradley's first major focus was the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, the nation's oil stockpile. With Scoop Jackson's okay, the freshman senator held classified hearings, deposing energy and national security experts on the cause of the energy crisis.

According to people who attended, witnesses revealed that the Carter administration had stopped filling the reserve in exchange for Saudi Arabia's efforts to resist OPEC price hikes. Bradley flew to Riyadh to meet with Sheik Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the Saudi oil minister, who threatened to raise oil prices if the United States began filling the reserve. "We appreciate your view, but we're going to fill the reserve because it's in our national interest," Bradley recalled telling him. Bradley sponsored legislation with Sen. Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) that compelled the government to do exactly that.

Bradley's syllabus for his life as a senator was long on independent study - particularly reading lists and travel. He regularly asked his Princeton thesis adviser and friend Arthur Link for assignments. In July 1983, Link suggested for Bradley's summer vacation reading, among others, "The Federalist" *("extremely relevant to our present-day problems")* and John C. Calhoun's "Disquisition on Government." Link felt obliged to caution his perpetual student, "Don't spend all of August reading. Leave a little time for just goofing off." It's not clear that Bradley took the advice.

He read presidential biographies, Cabinet officials' memoirs and novels about presidents - all in search of what a president's life was like. He also read biographies of high court justices and senators, realizing with pause that only presidents, among these high officials, had no time for personal growth.

He set himself an ambitious travel agenda, crossing the country hundreds of times. "Once, he had the idea to really know the countryside. He would go to real estate agents and ask what's on the market," said his wife, Ernestine, a professor of comparative literature. "And we'd look around and get the history of each house and why this was for sale. I'd sometimes say, 'Come on, do we have to listen to yet another story?' But that's what he really, really loves."

Ed Turlington, his guide on a trip through western North Carolina in 1988 and now his deputy campaign manager, said Bradley talked to people in country stores, on sidewalks, at historical sites, asking what they did for a living, what they thought the future held, what they cared about in life. John Roos, now a Bradley fund-raiser, took him to low-income East Palo Alto, Calif. "What are your dreams?" he asked schoolchildren.

On his foreign travels, his prime vehicle was the intelligence committee, where he arrived in 1984 with a list of areas to master: Russia, China, Mexico, Japan, Central America and arms control.
Bradley traveled widely in Russia, beginning with a 1985 trip to Siberia's Lake Baikal, the deepest in the world. His stated purpose was to study water and the environment, but according to John Despres, a long-time foreign policy adviser to Bradley and husband of Gina Despres, Bradley saw it as a rare corner where Soviets felt free to speak their minds.

Continuing trips to Russia, along with extensive hearings, led Bradley to part with many Democrats and oppose economic aid to Russia that wasn't tied to proof of democratic or market reforms.

Some of Bradley's independent studies proved less visionary. He voted against the use of force in the Persian Gulf in 1991, insisting that sanctions against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein be given more time to work, a position that time has rendered wishful.

In 1986, after traveling extensively in Central America and consulting widely, he broke with his party's liberals to vote for President Ronald Reagan's military aid package to the Nicaraguan contra rebels. Bradley termed the contras a stopgap for the spread of revolution in a region whose root problems he traced to poverty, crushing debt, Soviet and Cuban arms traffic, and botched U.S. policy.

But after diligently attending weekly intelligence committee oversight hearings on Nicaragua, Bradley concluded that Reagan had no serious contra policy, "only political purposes" - the argument of Democratic opponents all along.

On His Way Up

Bradley's national reputation soared after a landslide reelection in 1984. Two years later, Reagan signed the Tax Reform Act of 1986, and leaders of both parties credited Bradley with the vision and persistence that had driven it. The law slashed the top individual tax rate from 50 percent to 29 percent and removed 6 million poor men and women from the tax rolls, by shifting $100 billion in individual tax liability to corporations and abolishing most tax shelters.

Bradley by now had become friends with investment magnate Herbert Allen, who invited him each year to his Sun Valley, Idaho, retreat for the business elite and celebrities. Two other friends, Hollywood superagent Michael Ovitz and Disney President Michael Eisner, threw a Los Angeles gala in 1989 that raised $600,000 for Bradley, a sum Hollywood didn't lavish on mere senators. From 1984 to 1990, Bradley's total fund-raising more than tripled.

In the Senate there was admiring talk of a new, Bradley model for success. But on the Finance Committee, Bradley's moral war on tax shelters was exacting a toll on his effectiveness. In 1990 he proposed allowing dying people to claim death benefits, tax free, in the final stages of life. It was a dream issue - embraced by the elderly, AIDS activists and a major New Jersey corporate citizen, Prudential Insurance Co. Soon, the proposal had 72 Senate co- sponsors.

But Bradley couldn't deliver. Year after year, he argued for it in the committee, and year after year, Chairman Lloyd Bentsen (D-Tex.) found a reason to say no. An aide to Bentsen took Prudential lobbyist Tom O'Hara aside: "You have the wrong sponsor."

"It was his disdain for the process that raised questions," Randy Hardock, former tax counsel to Bentsen, said of Bradley's posture. "The truth is that he's right in theory. You wish nobody ever cut deals to pass a

bill. But that's the way it is, and even if he's elected he's not going to change it."

The measure finally passed in 1996.

Bradley said the trade-off between principle and effectiveness was a subject of "constant debate" within himself. "I occasionally had to go along with the small thing in order to get the big thing," he said. "There's a distinction. I always felt that my obligation was to use my judgment to make calls on the big thing, and sometimes I lost some of these small things," among which he included death benefits for the dying.

Lonely stands like these had little effect in the Senate. But outside, over time, they attracted people to Bradley the man, not Bradley the voting record - the kind of donors who form the financial bedrock of his presidential campaign.

"My goal was to find what I came to regard as 'monogamous fundraisers,' " Bradley wrote in his 1996 memoir, "Time Present, Time Past." This was the campaign equivalent of his virgin staffers. "Critics mislabeled this as egocentrism," said Bradley's former press secretary and his 1990 campaign manager, Nicholas Donatiello. "The truth is he was looking for people who were committed to what he was trying to accomplish. It requires a belief in your own uniqueness."

The Pedestal Teeters

Bradley's 1990 campaign was conceived as a celebration of his uniqueness. He raised $12.9 million, more than any incumbent except Phil Gramm (R-Tex.). His challenge from an unknown Christine Todd Whitman seemed so inconsequential that New York television stations didn't even cross the Hudson to cover his announcement. Bradley felt ignored, and downright cranky, according to aides.

"It was as if it was a pain in the ass to go through this," said Joe Peritz, then his pollster. "You know: 'Who'd want some woman you don't know when you can have me?' He thought he had the thing in the bag."

Then-Democratic Gov. James J. Florio, elected on a promise not to raise taxes, pushed a $2.8 billion income tax increase through the legislature, just as the recession was hitting New Jersey, and overnight a tax revolt exploded. Whitman joined the uprising, but Bradley refused even to comment on it, calling it a "state issue," irrelevant to a senator.

"A million dollars on public opinion polls and not a public opinion on the largest tax increase in New Jersey?" demanded Whitman in radio ads. Meanwhile, Bradley's multimillion-dollar TV campaign incongruously heralded a coronation with feel-good images of Bradley strolling the Jersey shore, shooting nothing-but-net hoops with kids, touting his commitment to the environment, children and health.

"Our whole premise was that Bill Bradley was taking New Jersey for granted - running for president - and we'd catch him at it," said Bill Palatucci, a Republican strategist who worked for Whitman.

Overnight, Bradley's national stature and his penchant for standing outside the fray became synonymous with the arrogance of power. Usually admiring editorial boards complained of "wretched excess" in his fund-raising and demanded that he debate Whitman and speak to the tax hike. "Besides being a senator, Mr. Bradley is a resident of New Jersey," the Record of Hackensack delicately pointed out.

Finally, Bradley did debate Whitman on television, but he stuck to his original script. When reporters asked

why he hadn't taken a stand on the tax hike, he bolted out a back door and into a waiting car.

"I have a vivid recollection of the technician chasing after him, and tapping on the car window, with everyone watching, and politely asking him, "Can I unpin my mike from your pants?' " said Palatucci. "He'd forgotten to take off the mobile mike. He came unglued."

Outspending Whitman 8 to 1, Bradley won by less than 3 percent of the vote, the closest margin of any Senate incumbent. At the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in Washington, where Democratic lobbyists gathered to watch returns, a loud cheer went up when Bradley's race was announced too close to call. "There was a sense Mr. Big For His Britches had been cut down a notch," said a lawyer who was there.

The Game Begins

Bradley read his near-defeat as a wake-up call for his soul, not his agenda.

"Ambition had fueled a desire to please, and had choked my leadership impulses," he wrote in "Time Present, Time Past." "For much of my career I had no authentic political voice. I had been campaigning all over the country not to change the world or shake up my audiences but to please the roomful of people to whom I was speaking. . . . As a result, my words rarely had the ring of truth to the nonpolitical observer."

Bradley told new staffers that legislation seemed less important to him now than moral leadership. He wanted to find his voice, he told them, on race, health, children, poverty and foreign policy. President George Bush gave him his first opening in June 1991 by denouncing bipartisan civil rights legislation as a "quota bill." Bradley spent most of the next weekend filling 36 legal pad pages with a torrent of emotion on what he saw as Bush's moral indifference on race.

"Mr. President, this is a cry from my heart, so don't charge me with playing politics," Bradley declared from the Senate floor. "I'm asking you to take the issue of race out of partisan politics and put it on a moral plane where healing can take place."

Bradley issued two more cris du coeur on race that year, and in the process began explaining himself, telling of coming of age as a white athlete in a mostly black sport. The speech that drew the most attention was his 1992 outcry upon the acquittal of Los Angeles police officers in the beating of Rodney King, when Bradley struck pencils against his microphone 56 times for the 56 blows officers had struck.

He shifted his focus increasingly outside the Senate. In 1991, he and his Princeton roommate and close friend, Dan Okimoto, an Asia expert at Stanford, assembled what they called a Futures Group of six scholars who met with him three times a year to think through the implications of rapid global and domestic changes.

Bradley also began working to break out of his obsession with technical mastery, seeing it as a limitation. In the 1980s, he had said he was drawn to taxes because "it's a closed body of knowledge you can come close to mastering with some certainty. It's not like the question 'What is beauty?' that has an infinite number of answers to it."

Bradley called on Singer, his Princeton friend who is a psychiatrist, for help in thinking about which "stories" or myths Americans draw on - even unconsciously - to cope with uncertainty. In particular, Bradley said he wanted to try to move the popular notion of leaders away from the old hero myth. Singer arranged a symposium, and recalled that Bradley was fascinated by British psychoanalyst Andrew Samuels's lecture,

“The Good Enough Leader” - not a savior, but one who excites people by conveying “that they [the citizens] are exciting, creative and autonomous people who can work cooperatively.”

Back in Washington, Bradley responded to the 1990 election by becoming much more responsive to state interests, particularly pharmaceutical companies, which employ 60,000 New Jerseyites. In 1984, his tax reform blueprint had proposed closing a loophole through which pharmaceutical companies saved $3 billion a year by locating facilities in Puerto Rico. But in 1992 and 1993, he championed efforts to save it, after the industry gave $108,000 to his 1990 campaign, the most given to any member of Congress, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Infuriated that critics suggested he was responding to contributors, Bradley said he no longer would accept money from political action committees.

But Bradley’s major passion of his last term was as far from New Jersey as they come: California’s Central Valley. From his Energy subcommittee, he resolved to reallocate scarce federal water from some of California’s most powerful landowners, who long had hoarded it, to cities, industries and the environment.

This, too, was part of the Bradley syllabus. In “Time Present, Time Past,” he wrote that the issue would make him intimate with the arid West, where water is as precious as oil.

“At first we were laughing,” said Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), then chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, who for years had tried to change the allocation system but never found a senator willing to take on the water barons. “We were saying, ‘Did you hear the one about the guy from New Jersey who wants to get involved in California water? You’ll never hear from this guy again.’

“But Miller watched in amazement as Bradley mastered the hydrology, ecology, economics, politics, law, river flow rates and saline levels of California water. Together they held 37 western water projects hostage - projects as essential as oxygen to Utah, Arizona, Colorado, South Dakota and New Mexico - effectively hogtying the Senate’s legendary “water fraternity” to a reform none of its members wanted.

In the end, western Republicans put so much pressure on Bush that he signed the bill over the protests of California’s Gov. Pete Wilson and Sen. John Seymour.

Now it was clear what Bradley had learned from Long, Jackson and others. “It was a little bit surprising to see Bill Bradley participate in this kind of logrolling,” said Dan Beard, Miller’s chief of staff. “You kind of eat crow. And he was great at it!”

Bradley next threw himself into the NAFTA debate. But after that, according to friends and advisers, his heart simply wasn’t in it. Excited at one point about health care reform, he dismissed Clinton’s plan as extreme. Bradley joined a bipartisan group of senators seeking a compromise that never materialized, but he was not among the stalwarts.

Meanwhile, Bradley watched his once-heralded tax reform of 1986 unravel as Clinton, with Bentsen as Treasury secretary, brought tax shelters back to life and raised the top tax rate. Without support from the top, “large structural reform” seemed almost as transitory as the incremental legislation he disdained. Friends and trusted aides were not surprised when Bradley announced in 1995 that he was leaving the Senate after the 1996 election, or that he left in anger, declaring politics broken, damning his own party as well as Republicans. In the weeks before he left, his inner circle talked openly about the best place for him to be from, assuming he ran for president. “It wasn’t the Senate,” one of them said.

There was another important element: The perpetual preparer was beginning to feel he had reached his destination. “Anybody who’s been near him very long can grasp the significance of him saying he’s ready,” said his last chief of staff, Bernie Toon. “That is absolutely huge.”

It also makes him a different person from the enigmatic figure who inhabited the Senate - or so he argues. Recently, he laughed at his obsessive preparation for the keynote address at the 1992 Democratic National Convention. Bradley wanted to rouse the hall the way Franklin D. Roosevelt had in 1940 with his litany against isolationists “Martin, Barton and Fish.” He looked up every verb that starts with “w” in search of a catchy chant to use against Bush. The result was hardly worth it: “He wiggled, he waffled and he wavered.” Bradley said recently that he is no longer so compulsive. “That’s the difference between thinking you’re not ready and thinking you’re ready. I mean, if you’ve prepared as much as you can, that’s it. The game begins.”

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.