



# ON THE PRESS

## *Newspaper Coverage of the 1986 Senate Race: Reporting the Issues or the Horse Race?*

by Paul Luebke

*This regular Insight feature examines how the North Carolina news media go about covering state government and public policy issues. This column examines how newspapers—not radio or TV—covered the 1986 race for the U.S. Senate between former Gov. Terry Sanford, the former president of Duke University, and U.S. Sen. James T. Broyhill, who had been appointed to a vacant Senate seat following a long career in the U.S. House of Representatives.*

Every Tar Heel political junkie can recall the contrasts between the Broyhill-Sanford race of 1986 and the Hunt-Helms confrontation two years before. Last year featured a blissfully short campaign, with “only” \$9 million expended, a minimum of negative advertising, and both candidates rooted in the center of their political parties. The 1984 race actually began during the spring of 1983, when Sen. Jesse Helms’ newspaper ads attacked Governor Jim Hunt’s connection to Rev. Jesse Jackson in a preview of the racial bitterness that would erupt in the nation’s most expensive U.S. Senate race. That race cost the two camps \$26 million (nearly three times what the 1986 campaign would cost) (see article on campaign finance, p. 100, for more), thrived on personal attacks, and juxtaposed New Right and moderate-Democratic ideologies.

What also differed between the two campaigns was the level of the press’ interest. North Carolina newspaper editors assigned fewer resources toward coverage of the Broyhill-Sanford contest than they had two years earlier, when the state’s papers were chock-full of stories about the campaign—including many pieces written by the national press and picked up locally. Newspapers in 1986 ran somewhat fewer stories, but a review

of press clippings during the fall—Labor Day through Election Day—indicates that newspapers vigorously reported the essence of the campaign, noting changes in Broyhill or Sanford strategy almost immediately. Not all of the state’s dailies have the same coverage style, to be sure. But through a combination of daily reports of events (known to journalists as “spot news”) as well as more reflective pieces not tied to a press deadline, North Carolina’s major dailies served the reading public well in letting them know what was happening in the candidate’s campaigns. The state press was most adept at covering this *horse race* aspect of the campaign—gauging how the campaign was going, who was leading, what the strategy was, and what voters the candidates were courting. But did the press delve into *policy issues* adequately? Did the press tackle some larger issues which were not directly connected to the two campaigns? An examination of more than 800 clippings from North Carolina newspapers during the fall indicates that by and large, these less-exciting but equally important aspects of the campaign were ignored in the heat of reporting on *events, trends, and character issues*.

In retrospect, Sanford’s unexpectedly aggressive campaign style may have contributed the most to his victory over Broyhill, and it certainly boosted interest in the campaign and sharpened

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*Paul Luebke, an associate professor of sociology at UNC-Greensboro, has written about North Carolina in academic journals and the popular press. His analysis of media coverage of the 1984 Helms-Hunt race appeared in the Washington Journalism Review. He is currently at work on a manuscript to be published as Tar Heel Politics: Class, Race, and Religion in North Carolina.*

press reporting of both camps. This theme emerges clearly in the daily reporting. Until well after Labor Day, the campaign had been somnolent, and press reporting of what little was going on was equally dull. But all that changed—and so did the reporting—in late September. Up until then, Sanford himself seemed unsure whether he wanted to deviate from the soft-sell “special leader” rhetoric which had helped him win the May 1986 Democratic primary. The state’s reporters quickly noted this ambivalence. Seth Effron, Raleigh reporter for the *Greensboro News & Record*, wrote September 17 that “key (Democratic) party officials were fretting privately that Democrat Terry Sanford isn’t campaigning aggressively and isn’t visible enough.”

Two weeks later, the press had more of the story when Sanford decided to take off the gloves against Broyhill. Rob Christensen, chief capital correspondent of *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, noted on October 2: “Terry Sanford, increasingly assuming the role of aggressor, said Wednesday that the record of . . . James T. Broyhill showed that he was ‘no friend of education.’” A similar story appeared in the same day’s *Winston-Salem Journal* (without a byline) quoting Sanford as going “on the offensive to pierce the ‘30-second electronic shield’ of Broyhill’s television ads.”

North Carolina’s newspapers have an excellent national reputation for seeking more than just the facts. They also like to capture the smells and the flavor of the story. Perhaps more so than the state’s other major dailies, *The Charlotte Observer*’s editors frequently allow their reporters to write reflective stories which focus on more than one day’s spot news. An excellent example is political reporter Ken Eudy’s article, also published on October 2, which noted that Sanford had “donned his old Army Airborne ring and used military imagery to suggest that he’s tough and his opponent is not.” Like his fellow reporters across the state, Eudy quoted Sanford’s defense of his 1961 decision to advocate a new sales tax on food: “(Broyhill) just wouldn’t have fit in with the men and women who risked their necks to vote for children and North Carolina’s future.”<sup>1</sup>

At this critical juncture in the campaign, Broyhill was reemphasizing his alliance with Ronald Reagan, hoping that the President’s high approval ratings would carry him to victory. The press presented Reagan’s message clearly during both of his brief October visits. *The News and Observer*, not usually inclined toward color photos, ran a large, page-one, color picture of Reagan on the morning after his October 8 visit to Raleigh. Corres-

pondent Christensen’s lead story cited the President’s depiction of “Broyhill as a solid conservative, while portraying . . . Sanford as a champion of higher taxes.” The October 29 *Winston-Salem Journal* similarly gave the President’s Charlotte airport rally front-page coverage, quoting directly Reagan’s assertion that Broyhill was “part of the 1980 clean-up crew for the worst economic mess since The Great Depression.” These papers also took note of the attendance at the two rallies, particularly because the Raleigh crowd had been surprisingly small, given the appearance of a popular President in a Bible Belt setting. The papers avoided speculating that this was a harbinger of things to come, however.

Although both Sanford and Broyhill brought in out-of-state politicians to enliven statewide barnstorming tours, such speakers were far more important to Broyhill’s strategy than to Sanford’s. When television evangelist-politician Pat Robertson stumped eastern North Carolina for Broyhill, the Republican campaign received straightforward coverage enunciating the Reagan and social-issues themes. Ken Murchison of the *Rocky Mount Telegram* wrote a page-one story on September 28 conveying Robertson’s blunt message to Tar Heels: “Marion G. ‘Pat’ Robertson . . . said a vote for Jim Broyhill in November is a vote for Ronald Reagan. Conversely, he said, a vote for Terry Sanford would be a vote for Teddy Kennedy, D-Mass., Alan Cranston, D-Cal., Howard Metzenbaum, D-Ohio, and other liberal Democrats who he said are responsible for the weakening of the moral fiber of the United States.”

In the same day’s *Sunday Fayetteville Observer-Times*, reporter Pat Reese stressed some of Robertson’s favorite issues. “Television evangelist Pat Robertson, a likely Republican candidate for president in 1988, sounded a battle cry for war against communism, crime and drugs as he joined a three-day, \$1 million fund drive for the election of Sen. Jim Broyhill.” The Broyhill campaign decision to try to peg Sanford as “soft on defense” by criticizing his alleged position on draft-dodgers also received press coverage—a strategy that blew up in his face like a claymore mine when Sanford emphasized to the press his own military background. On October 20, *News & Record* correspondent Effron gave advance notice of a pro-Broyhill press conference, which prompted a stinging on-the-record rebuttal from Sanford: “Today a group of veterans, led by longtime Broyhill backer state Senate Minority Leader Bill Redman, R-Iredell, will hold a news conference to attack Sanford’s record on defense and his support of amnesty for

draft evaders. Sanford, hearing of the impending attack, shoots back, 'Ask him why didn't he (Broyhill) serve in the Korean War?'"

With two weeks to go, reporters picked up on the sharp anti-Broyhill tone which emerged as key to Sanford's final offensive. *News and Observer* reporter Sally Jacobs quoted the Democrat's sports metaphor in an October 22 story: "Republican Sen. James T. Broyhill has 'struck out' in efforts to protect the textile industry, and it is time for someone else to step up to the plate, Democratic senatorial nominee Terry Sanford said Tuesday." And *Winston-Salem Journal* Washington correspondent Paul Haskins on October 30 stressed the contrast between Broyhill's attempt at pork barrel politics and Sanford's effort to hammer away at the pocketbook issues: "Sen. James T. Broyhill, R-N.C., took credit yesterday for getting a planned nuclear submarine named after Asheville, but former Gov. Terry Sanford, Broyhill's Democratic opponent in the U.S. Senate race, said that he'd

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prefer a new textile import barrier with North Carolina's name on it." The press was quick to note the public relations disaster for Broyhill: Effron pointed out that the area had only recently been relieved of the Reagan administration threat to create a spent-nuclear-fuel repository near Asheville, and naming a nuclear sub for the city only served to remind voters of nuclear waste.

The press also detected the shift in momentum toward the Democrats in the final weeks, by highlighting Broyhill's impatience with reporters and Sanford's subtle but seemingly deliberate attempts to contrast himself as a populist with Broyhill the patrician. *The News and Observer's* political-insiders column, "Under The Dome," on October 22 ran a long story on Broyhill's press relations, stressing in the lead sentence that Broyhill,

"generally considered a model of Southern reserve, got testy with reporters this week, angrily lecturing two of them Monday when they aggressively questioned him." Ironically, one had to read in *The News and Observer* that it was Effron whom Broyhill angrily poked in the chest while objecting to a story. Effron's own paper did not run an account of the chest-poking at the time of the incident but saved it for a later campaign wrap-up. In post-election reflection, Effron said writing about it immediately might have given the Broyhill campaign the false impression that the reporter was seeking to create news.

The press highlighted the differences which Sanford wanted to stress between the two men's backgrounds and experiences. In an October 19 story, *The Charlotte Observer's* Eudy quoted Sanford at an Albemarle campaign breakfast taking a sharp poke at Broyhill's upper-crust background. "[Sanford said that Broyhill] would have taken a knife and sliced that watermelon, and shared it. [Sanford] paused, then added that Broyhill would have asked for a napkin—'a linen napkin at that.' The audience hooted." Similarly, Effron wrote in the *News & Record* of October 24 about the two candidates at Charlotte's annual Mallard Creek Barbecue. "Sanford worked the crowd in his shirt sleeves; Broyhill kept his suit coat on and buttoned."

In the campaign's final days, the press focused on voter turnout. Tim Funk, Raleigh correspondent for *The Charlotte Observer*, reported on October 30 some detailed examples of Republican turnout "tools of the trade: phone banks, mailings, even recorded telephone messages from Reagan and Gov. Jim Martin." *The News and Observer* provided the most detailed coverage of turnout and demographics, writing long stories on both black and New Christian Right electoral organizing. For example, Christensen on October 29 provided an excellent explanation of the fundamentalist-Christian vote's significance for North Carolina politics: "With . . . Broyhill locked in the political fight of his life, leaders of the Christian Right are trying to mobilize a coalition of abortion foes, conservative evangelicals and others that they hope will pull him through Tuesday's election. That coalition often has been credited with helping elect Republicans . . . Helms in 1984 and . . . [former U.S. Sen. John] East in 1980. But how much the Christian Right backs Broyhill in his tight race with . . . Sanford remains a question." It was a question answered November 4, and Christensen's intimations were prescient: Fundamentalists did not turn out in 1984-sized numbers, a factor contri-

buting to Broyhill's defeat, Jacobs reported in *The News and Observer* in a November 8 vote analysis.

Reporters delivered their post-mortems on the race in the November 6 newspapers, the Thursday following the Tuesday election. The most succinct summary of Broyhill's decline came in Eudy's *Observer* story: "In interviews Wednesday, most Broyhill advisers agree the campaign derailed in mid-October, recovered late in the month, but not in time to catch Sanford, who hadn't won an election in 26 years."

In sum, North Carolina reporters deserve kudos for the careful coverage of the ebb and flow of Sanford's and Broyhill's campaigns. But a consequence of editors' assigning their reporters to file daily stories on candidates' activities, whether in Asheville or Asheboro, is that some more basic political questions remained unanswered. Examples of good stories missed include:

■ An October 19 *New York Times* dispatch from Washington, D.C. reported that Jesse Jackson had come to the state to bolster black organizational support for the Sanford campaign. Yet no North Carolina newspaper carried any follow-up to that story.

■ Editors, reporters, and both campaigns regularly discussed the absence or presence of "negative advertising." But no reporter defined the term "negative ad." Is a negative ad any criticism of an opponent's record, or personal attacks only, or gross distortions of a record? The Tar Heel press didn't say, leaving the distinct impression that any sort of comparative advertising is inherently sinister.

■ Sanford claimed that he was a friend of education and Broyhill was education's foe. Why did reporters not compare the candidates' records and draw their own conclusions? Or for another example, on economic issues, did Broyhill, the mainstream Republican, vote any differently than Helms, the champion of the New Right? And on social issues, how different were Sanford and Broyhill, both candidates from their parties' mainstream? Such articles were missing.

■ Social issues like race and abortion were central to Helms' reelection in 1984. Why were social issues debated less in the 1986 campaign? Unfortunately, the daily press didn't address these concerns in any more than a routine way.

■ Did class background really matter? Does serving the people mean you can't have grown up with linen napkins? In any event, Terry Sanford, former Duke University president and ITT board member, was no stranger to Fortune 500 circles, contrary to the impression he sought to make upon reporters. Did Sanford play the press like a

fine violin in the 1986 campaign?

■ Broyhill had more than 20 years' seniority in the House and could have, arguably, been a much more effective senator than Sanford, who had relatively little experience as a legislator (he served in the state senate in the 1950s) but who had vast experience as an administrator. Yet, despite these apparent strengths of the candidates, few reporters examined the record to determine whether their reputations were justified. How many bills did Broyhill introduce in his career and how many passed? What were the major effects of Sanford's governorship beyond the food sales tax impact on schools?

There were, of course, some exceptions during September, October, and November. *The Winston-Salem Journal* ran a series of issues pieces that ran in six Monday editions prior to the election. *The Charlotte Observer* published question-and-answer interviews with the candidates that addressed issues in its editorial section on October 23. And *The News and Observer* ran several pieces that addressed some of these concerns, including an October 16 story on Broyhill's votes on economic issues; and September 14 coverage of the candidates' records on social issues. Too, most of the papers delved into Sanford's corporate campaign finance connections, such as *The News and Observer's* October 26 story. But by and large, issues were not a prime ingredient of newspaper coverage of the campaign.

Unquestionably, the press reported thoroughly the horse race aspect of the campaigns. But reporting campaign events, and even reporting the color and flavor of a campaign in all its nuances and trends, is something that radio and television reporters can also do well. But where newspapers can excel—and where television and radio often do not because of the difficulty of illustrating such a story in a visual and aural format—is in the analysis of policy issues. North Carolina newspapers need to do more.

As politically interested North Carolinians begin thinking about 1988, a challenge emerges for Tar Heel newspaper editors and reporters. They need to reflect on how their generally high-quality daily coverage could be combined in 1988 with more in-depth analysis of policy issues which are not rooted in the daily routines of the candidates. All of us would benefit from an increase in that kind of political analysis. □□

#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup>In January, Eudy left the newspaper to become Executive Director of the state Democratic Party.