

RAISING THE BANNER HIGH

MARK GREEN

The Republican Party doesn't have Big Labor to fall back on, or Hollywood, or the mainstream media. It doesn't have the big city machines of Chicago and New York City that deliver votes regardless of . . . well regardless of anything. To succeed, the Republican Party must stand for ideas so clear and compelling that they can awaken and energize those who might otherwise sit out the political process.

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That's why Ronald Reagan used his leadership to "raise a banner of bold colors, not pale pastels." It's also why Tommy Thompson began his gubernatorial years with a Conservative agenda aimed at tearing down the walls of Wisconsin's decaying welfare state. Each step in his reforms—Learnfare, Workfare, Bridefare, School Choice, Wisconsin Works, etc.—united Conservatives, divided Liberals, and converted independents.

I hoped my campaign for governor would follow in their footsteps. In fact, I believed it was the only chance we had to overcome Jim Doyle's campaign millions and his office's political maneuvering.

That's why I built a policy team of two dozen men and women who shared a passion

for ideas . . . who believed in "bold colors." Over the course of many months, they thought and met and debated, and gradually created a package of 135 reforms. Our plans ranged from reaffirming some existing proposals—like a photo ID for voting and tax deductibility for health savings accounts—to dramatic new ideas of our own.

Among other things, we proposed a sportsman-centered restructuring of the DNR to take politics out of natural resource management. A budget plan that would reduce our tax burden and pay off our massive state deficit. Replacing the Department of Commerce with a much less bureaucratic public/private partnership. Pro-growth tax cuts that would attract, not repel entrepreneurs. An outside audit of the UW system as a first step towards restoring the taxpayers' faith. A plan to increase the percentage of in-state students at UW-Madison and end the UW's "holistic approach" to admissions.

I unveiled our proposals at press conferences around the state, and then spent the last four months of my campaign traveling in an

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RV that actually had one hundred of these proposals written on its sides. We billed them as “100 stops in 100 days” and a “roadmap to make Wisconsin great again.”

And yet we lost.

There were some obvious factors in the outcome. For one thing, Jim Doyle dramatically outspent us, and then for good measure, his friends (the teachers’ union, trial lawyers, and casino interests) spent millions more on negative ads. And he was able to manipulate the Wisconsin Elections Board into implying that my campaign was actually as unethical as his.

But why couldn’t our bold reform agenda overcome all of that? Was it too conservative? Was Jim Doyle right, and Wisconsinites no longer care about our heavy tax burden and anti-business climate? Perhaps voters really do support in-state tuition at the UW for illegal immigrants. Perhaps they really do want to see school choice sharply restricted.

I don’t believe it. I simply don’t believe that’s true. If it were, it would fly in the face of everything I saw and heard on the campaign trail. If it were true, then I wouldn’t want to be governor because it would mean leading a state so very different from the one I’ve always known.

What cost us the election was something more, and the exit polling bears it out. Voters didn’t oppose our message or the conservative reforms written on the side of that RV. It’s that they never really saw them. Their eyes were focused elsewhere. They didn’t vote on the basis of our ideas . . . in fact they didn’t vote on the basis of ideas at all.

The number one reason people voted for Jim Doyle was that he’s a Democrat. Or more precisely, he isn’t a Republican.

While we worked hard to follow Reagan’s model of raising a banner, nobody looked up to see it. They couldn’t, or wouldn’t, see past the (R) behind my name or the name of so many others who ran in 2006.

Part of that was due, of course, to anxiety over the war in Iraq. Voters felt mission fatigue, and saw votes against Republicans as a way to express it. But the larger reason was misbehavior by some of the GOP’s leaders in Washington. Whether it was Mark Foley’s disgusting actions or Duke Cunningham’s convictions or congressmen addicted to earmarks, voters were slapped over and over again by a small group of Republican leaders who were an embarrassment and a distraction . . . leaders who put themselves above the ideals they were sent to represent. The public’s attention was shifted away from the Conservative message and towards some of the messengers . . . and they didn’t like what they saw.

The Conservative movement hasn’t run out of ideas or energy. On the contrary, I believe it’s as vibrant as ever . . . especially at the grassroots. It has all the intellectual horsepower it needs to take on this generation’s greatest challenges. I’m proud of our policy team and the work they did . . . and can do in the future. Ronald Reagan’s bold colors are as bright as ever. We just need more standard bearers who are ready to hold them high.