

# The Miami Herald

## McBride Strategy Nailed Target

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On April 23 last year, while Tallahassee was consumed with end-of-session battles at the state Capitol, a politically unknown attorney with a far-fetched idea was getting acquainted across the street with five union leaders.

For 45 minutes over soft drinks, Bill McBride described his up-from-the-bootstraps background, emphasized that Florida needed to invest more in education and offered himself as the best Democratic candidate for governor.

It was a brazen pitch from a soft-spoken man who was a political nobody preparing to challenge a host of formidable opponents.

But it worked.

"Everybody in the room took an immediate liking to him. After that, it would have been tough to get people off the Bill McBride bandwagon," said Mike Williams, president of the Florida Building Trades union and host of the meeting.

McBride became the Democratic candidate for governor thanks to a winning blueprint that he initially developed 18 months ago, when he was still the longest of long shots, and that he refined in late 2001 after hiring a team of professional consultants, when he still trailed former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno by 51 percentage points.

His strategy: Woo key Democratic leaders before his opponents began to mobilize; develop an education plan that would resonate with voters unhappy with Florida's schools; win the early endorsement of the state's unions; avoid attacking Reno; tap into his own political and legal contacts to raise money - and slip past Reno in the final week of the campaign after a barrage of TV ads.

Few people could have confidently predicted as recently as two months ago that McBride would carry out this strategy successfully. McBride never had his doubts.

"I always thought I was going to win," he said a few days before the primary as he was being driven to a fundraiser in Tampa. "While everybody was deciding what to do," he said, "I was executing my plan."

That confidence, reflective of a man who led troops in battle in Vietnam and who built the state's biggest law firm, was also a key reason for McBride's improbable rise.

It was clear by the time that he formally announced his candidacy, July 2, 2001, that Reno would likely enter the race herself. When she did Sept. 4 last year, she was immediately dubbed the overwhelming favorite after eight years as President Clinton's attorney general.

One by one, big-name would-be Democratic candidates dropped by the wayside. Meanwhile, McBride kept plugging away, unaffected by the doubts that felled the other Democrats.

He and his wife, former bank executive Alex Sink, had decided early on that he would drop out only if either of them or their children had health problems.

"That saved ourselves a lot of anxiety when there were a lot of people in the race," McBride said. "We didn't have to spend a lot of time wondering whether we were in or not."

#### LEAVE OF ABSENCE

He began his quest in March 2001, taking a leave of absence from Holland & Knight, the law firm that he had led since 1992. McBride signed up his political friends in the Tampa Bay region first, then got them to introduce him to political leaders elsewhere in Florida. After the April 23 meeting at the Florida Building Trades, for example, Mike Williams introduced McBride to key union leaders across the state.

Cindy Hall, who was also at the April 23 meeting, was so impressed with McBride that she brought him to meet leaders of the state teachers' union that day, then arranged to have him meet her boss, Pat Tornillo, who headed the teachers' union in Miami-Dade County.

"He let me know that he didn't like the direction Jeb was taking Florida. He also committed to me that he would make education the No. 1 issue," Tornillo remembered. "That sold me."

By early May 2001, McBride also had begun making inroads in Broward County - which has more Democrats than any other county in Florida - thanks largely to Dan Reynolds, president of the Broward AFL-CIO.

#### POLITICAL ROUNDS

On May 7, Reynolds made the political rounds with McBride, visiting prominent law firms, meeting with Pat Santeramo, president of the Broward teachers' union, and touching base with state Sen. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Pembroke Pines Democrat.

By June 4, McBride remained a political nobody, but his behind-the-scenes strategy was working well enough that he resigned from Holland & Knight to campaign full time. A month later, McBride made his prime-time debut before more than 1,000 Democrats gathered for the party's annual meeting at the Fontainebleau Hilton in Miami Beach.

It was a disaster. During his five-minute speech, his voice was flat and unemotional. Afterward, a woman came up to him and said, "Mr. McBride, that was the most boring speech I've ever heard."

A well-meaning friend sought to cheer him by saying, "Bill, don't pay attention to her. She hasn't had an original thought in years. All she does is wander through the crowd repeating what everyone else is saying."

McBride went to Washington to work with professional speaking coaches.

#### 'TIRED OF YELLING'

He also tapped Washington contacts to begin building a campaign staff. He selected two Democratic heavyweights, David Doak as media strategist, Geoff Garin as his pollster. When they first met, Doak was struck by why McBride had given up law for politics: "I'm running for governor because I got tired of yelling at the TV set," McBride told him.

During the week of Oct. 23, the consultants gained insights when they convened six sessions with likely Democratic voters in Jacksonville, Tampa and Fort Lauderdale.

The polling also showed that despite Bush's claims to be the "education governor," the public was highly dissatisfied and wanted better public schools, surveys showed. The campaign began developing an education plan that McBride unveiled at this year's state Democratic Party convention.

#### RENO'S BAGGAGE

Robin Rorapaugh, McBride's campaign manager through the primary, said the polling provided one other insight. Reno had so much political baggage that a candidate who raised enough money to become known to voters could defeat her.

At a Dec. 15 meeting at the Airport Marriott in Tampa, Doak told McBride and the other top campaign advisors, "We have to have patience, and we have to have the courage and the nerve to stay the course. If we overtake Reno, it won't be until the last week of the campaign."

Early this year, more pieces began to fall into place, although few outsiders realized it at the time. On Jan. 17, the teachers' union surprised the political world by endorsing McBride over Reno. In March, the full AFL-CIO announced its support for McBride. The endorsements provided him with credibility and, just as important, a small army of volunteers and money for the succeeding months.

Still, by April, a Herald/St. Petersburg Times poll showed McBride trailing Reno by 28 percentage points.

### LOYALISTS NERVOUS

By the summer, McBride loyalists were getting antsy, pressuring him to begin his TV advertising campaign. He counseled patience.

"What I need to do over the next four or five weeks is to get people to know me," he told supporters July 11 at the Davie home of Broward County Commissioner Lori Parrish.

The following day, after speaking to the American Legion in Orlando, McBride said, "I get the sense that the campaign is moving up. This is going to be one of those turning points in Florida history."

Two days later, the teachers' union began broadcasting a TV ad that introduced McBride to large swaths of Florida. By early August, his own poll showed he had risen to within 19 percentage points of Reno. Still, few gave him a chance of victory.

They didn't know that McBride's own advertising was about to kick in and that it would prove surprisingly effective in pulling undecided voters into his column.

By Aug. 27, two weeks before Election Day, the Democrats met in their only televised statewide debate. Alan Stonecipher, McBride's spokesman, had a new poll in hand showing McBride within striking distance, trailing Reno by only 6 points - and rising.

### NEW FRONT-RUNNER

That night, McBride sat on stage with Reno and state Sen. Daryl Jones and played a new role, that of the front-runner. He chose not to attack his opponents.

A Herald/St. Petersburg Times poll taken immediately afterward showed the unthinkable: McBride had caught Reno. The campaign strategy's ultimate goal had become a reality a week early.

Only one thing could stop him - an attack campaign by the Republican Party that claimed McBride mismanaged Holland & Knight.

But the McBride campaign had anticipated the attack - it had taped a response weeks before and stored it - and immediately began broadcasting an ad in which McBride sat in a classroom, looked straight into the camera and told viewers not to believe the attacks.

Thanks to the quick response, the GOP ad backfired, the McBride campaign's research showed. The attack served to make McBride better known. A second Republican attack ad, harder edged, did slow his momentum.

The day of the election, the man who for months campaigned throughout Florida without notice had five TV cameras, five still photographers and a gaggle of print reporters waiting as he voted.

"We've run a good campaign," he told the throng. "I have no regrets."