

## **The Difference a Tough Year Makes**

*Sen. Gordon Smith competes in the race of a lifetime*

By Jim Pasero

If you're going to become a baron of the United States Senate — one of those five or six term members such as Ted Kennedy, Mike Mansfield, Russell Long, Barry Goldwater, Robert Taft, Scoop Jackson, or Oregon's Mark Hatfield and Bob Packwood — and build a legendary career of service, then along the way it's inevitable that you will have to run for re-election in a year that your party is out of fashion. Sometime in your career you will face such a nightmare cycle.

For Bob Dole, 1974 was the nightmare cycle.

Dole ran for re-election that year as a Kansan freshman senator. Three months before the election, Richard Nixon resigned the presidency. Dole happened to be chairman of the Republican National Committee at the time. Packwood, who was in Dole's class and running for re-election himself, comments on Dole's 1974 predicament: "I'm sure Dole knew nothing about Watergate."

But it didn't matter. Kansas voters found Dole guilty by association. He spent much of the race down by more than double digits to Democrat congressman and dentist, Dr. William Roy. In the end, Dole squeaked by with a 13,000-vote advantage out of nearly 800,000 votes cast. Though he was the incumbent, Dole's victory was considered an upset. Thirty years later, his opponent wrote a commentary in the *Topeka Capital-Journal* about Dole's close call with political oblivion. "The race is significant only because of the subsequent major achievements of Dole, who went on to the most distinguished political career in Kansas history. I am glad he did, because I like being involved marginally in history," wrote Roy.

This year it's Gordon Smith's turn to face his own nightmare re-election cycle. To ease the pain, Smith has been comparing notes with other threatened but respected GOP senate incumbents, such as Norm Coleman (Minn.), Susan Collins (Maine) and, ironically, Elizabeth Dole (N.C.).

So how bad is this year for Gordon Smith?

"The anti-Bush feeling is stronger than anti-Carter feeling," says Packwood. "In 1980, I didn't run into a lot of people that *hated* Jimmy Carter."

Packwood points to another symptom of an unpopular president that is potentially harmful to Smith. "There is a tremendous registration surge of Democrats, especially young Democrats. The question is, are they going to vote in a general election? In Oregon, the increase in registration is stunning, and if that turnout continues, it could be one of those years that you get swept out through no fault of your own."

This year's cycle is not like Smith's first run for re-election in 2002. Portland-based pollster Tim Hibbitts explains the difference. "In 2002, George Bush in Oregon had a 55-60 percent approval rating; now it's 30 percent. In 2002, the president had an approval rating not harmful to Smith and arguably marginally helpful. In 2002, there was still the hangover of 9/11, and while Bush's ratings slid from 85-90 percent approval, they were still very good."

In Hibbitts' view, the cycle you run in matters, a lot. "I don't see Bill Bradbury and Jeff Merkley as radically different."

What is different is the year. "Under a scenario where you put Merkley in Bradbury's spot in 2002, Merkley wouldn't have a chance in hell," says Hibbitts. "Conversely, Bradbury would be more competitive in 2002. The race is closer than the 8-10 point lead that recent polls show favoring Smith. But Smith is ahead. He is the favorite."

A late summer Rasmussen poll registered the race at Smith 50, Merkley 44. Survey USA had the race in Smith's favor 49 – 37. However, in early September, the Cook Political Report moved the Oregon Senate race from the category of Leaning Republican to the category of Senate Toss Ups, making it one of the five most competitive races in the nation.

Despite the smashing success of GOP VP nominee Sarah Palin, Hibbitts doesn't see Palin altering Smith's re-election landscape. "The reality is it's unlikely that Palin will benefit Smith. She is still the vice presidential candidate, and people vote for the top of the ticket. But clearly, there has been a bounce for the Republicans. The reason for that is twofold: Palin rallied the base, and McCain's speech at the convention, I think, helped him with voters, and it has helped Republicans across the board."

Smith may still be the favorite, but this cycle he is under a lot of pressure — pressure to rise above his party's unpopularity and pressure to meet the high expectations of his family's long and proud history of public service.

It has taken skill for Gordon Smith to survive as a Republican from Oregon in the U.S. Senate. It has also left Smith with a litany of crimes committed against the Republican base.

The charges against Smith by the Republican right read as follows: his hate crimes bill, his vote against drilling in ANWR, calling the president criminal, lack of support for the Surge, his support of cap and trade, and his commercials that highlight his support for Obama's policies. It is quite an indictment.

Then Smith added to his transgressions by joining seven other incumbent GOP senators running for re-election who skipped the Republican Convention in Minneapolis. Smith also asked that his name be removed from the McCain Oregon campaign. Smith's response to ducking the campaign: "What McCain wants me to do is get re-elected for him."

Along the way Smith has had to endure tough treatment from conservative radio talk show hosts such as KXL's Lars Larson and Rob Kremer, and KPAM's Victoria Taft. An August talk-radio poll on KPAM's Victoria Taft Show is typical of the kind of treatment Oregon's junior senator receives from their listeners:

*Should Senator Gordon Smith, a Republican, and John McCain's campaign chair in Oregon ditch the Republican convention?*

- A) *Yes. Ditch it if Republicans make you feel uncomfortable.*
- B) *No. Be a man and go.*
- C) *You're kidding! He's a Republican?*

Answer C received a 72 percent response.

For his part, Smith refuses to appear on the radio with these hosts and brushes aside the harsh comments by speaking of the Republican base in positive measures. "I am comfortable with the right wing of my party. It consists of people who like to win, who are principled, pragmatic and overwhelmingly support my re-election." Smith does add, "Sure, there is a rogue element here and there."

What has emerged in Gordon Smith's 12 years in the U.S. Senate is a political flexibility and expediency that has allowed him to survive as the only Republican senator on the Left Coast. Those skills are often admired by his national colleagues, even while they exasperate the party base here in Oregon. And that "rogue element" Smith refers to is a real force within the Oregon GOP, and they are genuinely dissatisfied with his political flexibility. The junior senator himself helped reignite the issue this summer. His television advertisement praised his courage for breaking with the president and for being against the Surge. Smith ran the ad bragging about being against the Surge months after government officials, Iraqi leaders and most of the media were admitting its success. This is the brazen, in-your-face, intellectually dubious positioning that Smith is not only known for, but good at. It has kept him politically viable in Oregon, but it drives his core supporters nuts.

KPAM talk show host Victoria Taft captures the base's frustration with Smith: "I know Gordon votes a lot with the GOP. That's good. I just wish he would speak up and be a proud Republican ... He should stand up for what he believes. But he doesn't. If there's a *conservative* position that he's taken, that he's shouted from the rafters about, I don't know what it is. He's gotten *plenty* of ink about being on the wrong side on the Iraq Surge and the inane 'hate crimes' legislation."

Packwood sees it differently. "Smith is a decent man. I find him smart, helpful." As for his trouble with his base, Packwood adds, "I am inclined to ignore people who are so zealous on the right or left. There is no placating them, and it's not his constituency."

Hibbitts believes that Smith determined a while ago that being associated with the president would hurt him in Oregon and that he needed his independence. Does Hibbitts see Smith's leftward lurches as a desperate campaign ploy? "No," says the pollster, "he has smart people around him. They are not stupid."

Still, Hibbitts is impressed with the audacity of Smith's break with his base. "Commercials with Smith promoting John Kerry and Obama — it is remarkable, unprecedented. I have never seen it done in my lifetime in Oregon, maybe not in the nation."

Lori Weigel, a partner in Public Opinion Strategies, a firm that currently polls for eight GOP governors and 18 GOP Senators, compares Smith's strategy to that of Sen. Joe Lieberman (ID-Conn.). Weigel believes that though Smith and Lieberman faced opposite predicaments, in some ways their tactics are similar.

After Lieberman lost his Democrat primary in the spring of 2004 because he did not oppose the war, his path to re-election in Connecticut ran through GOP voters. "Eventually his appeal was with GOP voters," says Weigel, "as he was able to attach himself to President Bush. Republican voters were able to say, 'He's a good Democrat, the type who is supportive of the president.' And some Democrats could support him as independent.

"Smith running ads with compliments from Barack," adds Weigel, "takes this approach to a new level. In Oregon, this could be what you have to do to win, but it is sort of a slap in the face to GOP voters. There are a lot of conservative areas in Oregon."

Gordon Smith's campaign tactics this year may be taking it to a new level, but part of that may be explained by his extended family's efforts to land three members in next year's U.S. Senate class — something that has never been done in American history. This attempt by one western family with a historic pedigree increases the internal pressure Smith must feel this year. And it's not like he didn't have enough pressure on him already.

But there are extenuating circumstances. It is the Left Coast, and since 2002 when Washington Democrat Maria Cantwell beat Republican incumbent Slade Gordon, Smith has been the lone Republican senator in the 1,400-mile stretch between Mexico and British Columbia. It hasn't been an easy task, especially in Oregon, which by some measures is arguably the bluest of all 50 states (Republicans have lost six gubernatorial contests in a row). Only California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger shares Smith's pain in representing a liberal state as a Republican. Smith knows the governor and even hosted a fundraiser for him at the 2004 national convention. When asked about their shared predicament, Smith says, "We haven't talked a lot about that, but there is a mutual understanding."

You might think Smith's two relatives, Mark and Tom Udall, who are looking to join him in the U.S. Senate, would eventually help ease his political loneliness, but you'd be wrong. They happen to be liberal Democrats.

If Gordon Smith isn't the voting base's dream of a U.S. Senator as far as taking on partisan fights, his own family's political divisions might play a part. Political contradictions are a natural in the Smith/Udall family heritage, and that may have something to do with Smith's easy political flexibility and subsequent survival in Oregon politics.

Born the eighth of 10 children to Milan Smith and Jessica Udall, Gordon Smith is descended from one of the West's most famous political families, especially on his mother's side.

Smith lays out the family heritage in his partial biography, "Remembering Garrett: One Family's Battle with a Child's Depression."

*The Udalls are to Arizona what the Kennedys are to Massachusetts. My great-grandfather, David King Udall, was one of the lawmakers who drafted Arizona's constitution when it was admitted to statehood. My grandfather, Jesse A. Udall, was for many years the chief justice of the Arizona Supreme Court. My second cousins, Stewart Udall (secretary of the interior in the Kennedy administration) and Morris Udall (1976 presidential candidate), were prominent leaders in the Democratic Party and on the national stage. Today, I serve in Congress with two of their sons, Representative Tom Udall of New Mexico and Representative Mark Udall of Colorado.*

On his father's side, the lineage is solid as well. His father, Milan Smith, served eight years in the Eisenhower administration as assistant secretary of agriculture.

Gordon Smith's great grandfather, David King Udall, who helped draft the Arizona constitution, was the founder of the Udall political dynasty. He was also a polygamist and served time in jail for a perjury conviction in a dubious land fraud case in the 1880s. Udall's business partner, Miles P. Romney (Mitt's great grandfather), fled to Mexico to establish a haven for other polygamists. Says Smith about the real reason for his great grandfather's prison days: "My grandfather spent time in federal prison for two wives. It was Barry Goldwater's father, Barron, who paid the bill."

Family lore about David King Udall demonstrates the close proximity of some of American's most famous western families, the Goldwaters, the Udalls, the Romneys. And it provides insight into Gordon Smith's strong drive to national public service.

That same lore highlights the contradictions within — Gordon Smith comes from a family of mixed political heritage, making public life very complicated in this partisan age. After all, there aren't any Kennedy Republicans (save Schwarzenegger), and there certainly are no Bush family Democrats. You can't say the same for the Udall/Smith clan.

This year Smith's two second cousins, Mark and Tom Udall, are solid favorites to capture U.S. Senate seats now currently held by Republicans. Tom Udall, son of Stewart Udall, received a 100 percent approval rating for his congressional voting record from both NARAL and the Sierra Club in Colorado. Mark Udall, son of the famous political humorist Morris Udall, is married to Maggie Fox, a 20-year employee of the Sierra Club.

"We get together every month or so in Washington and share a meal," says Smith. (The three are endorsing one another.) "We argue about the environment and natural resources."

In mid-August, Oregon native and *Wall Street Journal* columnist Kimberly Strassel devoted her weekly "Potomac Watch" column to the Colorado senate race between Mark Udall and Bob Schaffer. Strassel noted that Schaffer was closing in the race because of climbing energy prices. "Mr. Udall has made it easy: In his house tenure he's voted against offshore drilling 15 times," she wrote, "against Alaskan drilling four times, and against expanding refinery capacity six times."

Despite Smith's own opposition to drilling in ANWR and his support of his cousins' candidacies, his reaction to Strassel's story was positive. He knew that the *WSJ* writer's words would needle his cousin's hard-core environmental positions.

As a former Oregon senator and now Washington lobbyist, Packwood has been watching Smith's career with interest. "I think Gordon is following the correct strategy. He is ahead in the polls, consistently eight to 10 points, where he has always been. And this is the worst year he will have to run in to get re-elected."

Packwood also knows the benefits to Oregon voters if they send him back to Washington for a third term, the benefits of the U.S. Senate's seniority system. "He will be on all the finance conference committees during his third term. He will be the chairman or ranking member of a subcommittee. Seniority forces a responsibility on you. It energizes you into being responsible."

In other words, seniority pushes you down the road to being a Senate baron, an Everett Dirksen, a Richard Russell, even an Orrin Hatch. Will Gordon Smith get there?

One of Smith's big advantages in this year's election is his weak opponent, Jeff Merkley. Says Hibbitts about the incumbent's Democrat opponent, "Merkley is not exciting, and that limits his upside."

Good news for Smith? Maybe, but Hibbitts thinks the presidential race could have a down-ticket effect.

Hibbitts believes Oregon is not competitive on the presidential level — "Obama will defeat McCain by more than 5 points."

Bad news for Smith? Not necessarily. “I think it is possible on a national basis that Obama, if he wins, won’t have coattails. If voters vote for Obama,” says Hibbitts, “they might go down ballot and vote for some GOP candidates that are tolerable to them to put a check on Obama, so he doesn’t go too far. Conversely, if McCain were to win, GOP losses could be bigger.”

Voters are capable of some cognitive dissonance. “People are perfectly capable, unlike political analysts and some ideologues, of keeping two thoughts in their head about the same issue,” says Hibbitts. “Such as, thought one, the Surge is working and that’s good. And thought two, we still shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

Voters keeping two thoughts in their head this fall might be just what Gordon Smith needs to get himself through this tough and passionate election cycle.

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