

National News

Candidates' First Impressions Resonate

71 Percent Looking For Candidate Who Can Relate

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The night began poorly for Al Gore and got worse. When 12 Maryland citizens, all Democrats, talked about politics for several intense hours, the vice president couldn't catch a break. They decided Gore's rival for the Democratic nomination, Bill Bradley, was genuine, soulful and interesting. They found Republican George W. Bush to be an engaging fellow. Gore made no human connection at all.

"I see only problems," muttered Stanley Axel, 61, a Social Security Administration analyst, throwing up his hands.

Told what the group said about him, Gore was exercised. "I don't know how to react to that and I don't know who they are or what they saw or whether they were leading questions," Gore said, pushing his chair back from the table in a brief fit of pique during an interview with The Associated Press.

Focus groups are not scientific samplings of public opinion.

Peter Hart, a Democratic and media pollster who brought the cross-section of Maryland Democrats together, remembers focus groups that concluded future presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush would not amount to anything.

Instead these encounters gauge visceral reactions - sometimes helping

to identify qualities people want in a candidate. Campaigns use them widely, some of them treating the findings as "sacred text," as Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan put it. At Hart's session, it was easy to forget Gore is leading his race with Bradley.

"Not really presidential material," said Kevin Westreich, 40, an insurance claims examiner who arrived undecided. "We can do better." The media watched behind one-way glass. The group found itself attracted to Bradley, especially after watching video clips of his and Gore's Oct. 9 speeches to a Democratic dinner in Iowa. The seven who arrived leaning to Gore or undecided left thinking Bradley was their man.

Bradley stood solemnly behind the lectern, reading glasses perched low on his nose and his voice barely a singsongy step above a monotone. "To me he projects integrity," said Jerry Schunick, 61, a wedding photographer. "That's what I see in this man. I just get that feeling." Gore roamed the stage and gestured.

"I think he even has a choreographer for his hands," said Ruth Collison, 54, a homemaker and freelance artist. Reesa Luger, 53, who until this night supported Gore, agreed. "I felt like he was acting something that someone had written for him to say."

Gore said that speech and other recent ones have been well received, especially since he's been "getting rid of some of the habits I picked up as vice president," including pausing before he speaks.

"Everybody and his brother and sister that I talked to who saw those speeches had the same reaction," he said, that "what I was saying made sense."

Hart said that in presuming Bradley would be a good leader, the group was grasping at "the thinnest reeds possible," including his basketball career.

Yet he said of Bradley, a former New Jersey senator: "The first handshake he has with the American public is a pretty firm one."

Hart was surprised at the warmth shown for Bush. If he "can keep it light and friendly and easy, he is going to have a major advantage," he said. "People are comfortable with him."

A recent Pew poll underscored the importance voters place on the human connection.

In it, 71 percent said a candidate's ability to relate to average people was of prime importance - more important than any voting record, religious involvement or childhood experiences.

Pew found that Gore's perceived personal shortcomings are a major reason people give for not wanting to vote for him.

Hart's group fleshed out findings like those.

Bush the Republican was the candidate these Democrats most wanted to spend a weekend with. "Plenty to chat and talk about," one said. Great family, said another.

A Bradley weekend? "Relaxed and low-key," offered Noel Sills, 24, an account executive. "He would want to know a lot about you," said Axel.

Ventura Mixed on Run for President

The Associated Press

Reform Party Gov. Jesse Ventura says he would consider a presidential run next year if Minnesotans mobilize behind him.

The governor made the comment Tuesday in an interview with Harvard Current magazine. Ventura has previously said he did not want the job of president, would not run and planned to fulfill his commitment to serve a four-year gubernatorial term begun in 1999.

"If I turn around and run for president then I lied to all the people of Minnesota," he said. "So unless you can get Minnesotans to say, 'Go ahead, Governor Ventura, run for president, we give you our backing ...'"

An interviewer asked whether Ventura would run if Minnesotans mobilized fully behind him.

"I'd consider it, but then again I got to want the job and I'd have to consider it with my family and I don't know if my family would want me to do that."

He continued, "If you can mobilize Minnesota to do it, then, you know, there we are." The magazine interviewer asked, "What do you mean, 'There we are'?"

Ventura responded, "That would open the door for the possibility of it. But by no means am I telling you I would do it."

The interviewer asked, "But there is a possibility, a hope?"

Ventura, "Yeah."

The governor's spokesman John Wodele was traveling with Ventura, but refused to comment on the contents of the interview or hand the phone to Ventura, who was sitting next to him.

"I don't see any reason for me or any one else to expand on what he said," Wodele said. "What he said is what he said."

Wodele later said, "If you can read this interview and arrive at the conclusion that he's going to be president a year from now, you're in political la-la land."

In a separate interview Tuesday, Ventura sent a different signal about the presidential contest.

"I'm the natural candidate to do it, but I don't want to do it. You gotta want the job. I don't want the job; it's that simple. I do not want the job," Ventura said.

Minnesota Planning Agency director Dean Barkley, who recruited Ventura to run for governor, said Ventura's comments to the Harvard Current ran counter to any discussions he had with him.

"In all of our discussions, he has always expressed the clear-cut desire not to get involved in the presidential race. I haven't heard anything different," Barkley said. "He's clearly told me that he's not interested in running."

Ventura, however, has recently expressed some interest. In an interview conducted in early October and published Sunday, Ventura told a New York Times Magazine reporter, "I know I should be the candidate. But what do I do? I'm between a rock and a hard place."

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D I V E R S I T Y

Coroner reports Shepard hit 20 times

Associated Press

A gay Wyoming college student was beaten on the head with fists and a blunt instrument and could have been in pain for hours after he was tied to a fence and left to die, a coroner said Tuesday.

Dr. Patrick Allen of the Larimer County, Colorado, coroner's office testified on the second day in the murder trial of Aaron McKinney, 22, accused of first degree murder, kidnapping and robbery in the 1998 beating death of Matthew Shepard, 21.

"Some of his injuries were caused by fists, but the skull fractures were caused by a blunt instrument consistent with the gun," Allen, whose office performed the autopsy, told jurors.

Police say McKinney and his friend Russell Henderson, both 21 at the time of the crime, lured Shepard from a Laramie bar and beat him with a .357 magnum before tying him to a fence on a road outside of town.

"When Matthew Shepard was tied to the fence could he feel pain? Could he be thirsty? Could he feel cold?" Albany County District Attorney Cal Renucha asked the physician.

"Yes, he may have felt pain because he may never have completely lost consciousness," Dr. Allen said. Shepard was found by a passerby some 17 hours after the attack, and died five days later on Oct. 12, 1998 in a Colorado hospital that serves the region.

Two women jurors wept quietly when they viewed graphic autopsy photographs.

The prosecution on Tuesday was tying to counter defense arguments that Shepard, a University of Wyoming student, did not suffer while tied to the fence after the beating because he was unconscious.

The brutal nature of the attack on Shepard, who had a slight build and was openly gay, has received worldwide attention and sparked renewed calls for anti-hate crime legislation in the United States.

The defense has not denied McKinney's role in the attack, but said his background of child abuse coupled with the fact he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol when he met Shepard provoked a rage.

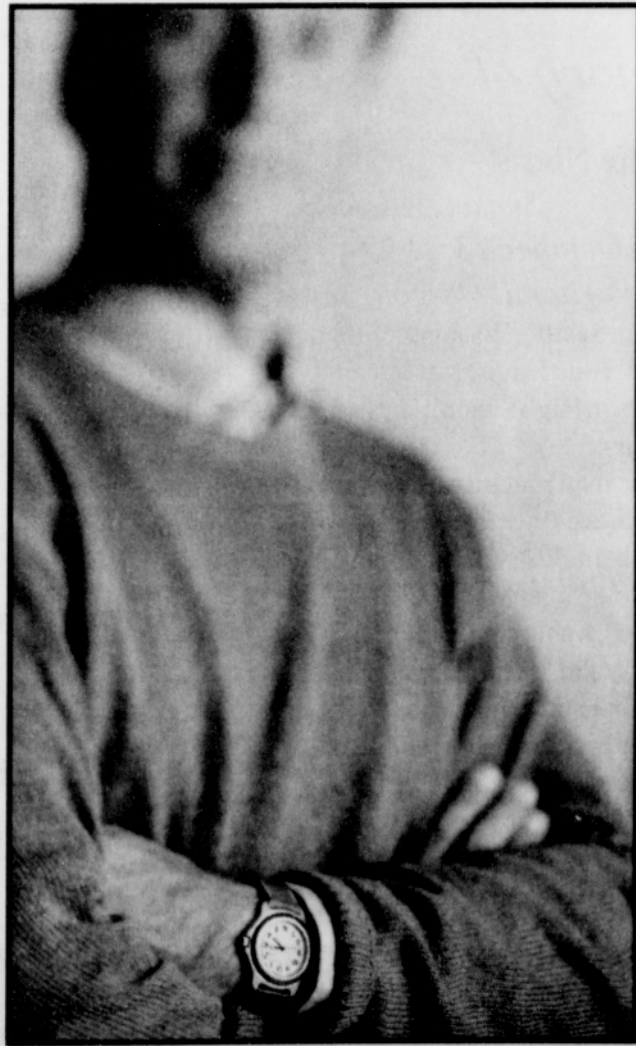
The prosecution has portrayed McKinney, a high school dropout, as a "cold-blooded savage" who ignored Shepard's pleas for mercy.

McKinney could face the death penalty if found guilty. His lawyers are trying to convince the jury that McKinney could not have formed the necessary intent for first degree murder, which is needed for the death penalty.

The defense argument is a variation on the "gay panic" defense which the gay community finds offensive.

"This homosexual panic (theory) is introduced to mitigate the responsibility of the killer. Someone is approached by a homosexual then they sort of lose it and therefore they are not responsible for what they do," Jeffrey Montgomery, a gay activist who is monitoring the trial, said.

In April, Henderson pleaded guilty to murder and kidnapping and was sentenced to two life prison terms. He is expected to testify at McKinney's trial.



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