

Garry South

PART I: From Montana to California

Interview conducted by Carla Marinucci in Marina del Rey, California, on October 26, 2023

Carla Marinucci: Welcome. I'm Carla Marinucci and we are here for Capitol Weekly. This is a program funded by the California State Library, and our guest today is the veteran California political consultant, Garry South. With more than 4years experience, Garry ranks as one of the most well-known, one of the most prolific political consultants in the state, of course, known for managing the successful campaigns of Gray Davis for both lieutenant governor and governor. Also known for his very tart-tongue commentary. The 'Mouth from the South' is the nickname for Garry South. Welcome Garry South. Good to be with you.

[laughter]

Garry South: Thank you. We'll see how good it is.

[laughter]

CM: Yeah. Look, you live and breathe politics, Garry. And you have been in California and been on the scene for decades now, but a lot of people would be surprised to know you're not a California guy, you are a Montana guy. Tell us a little bit about how it all started and your obsession with politics in Montana.

GS: Well, I grew up in a little town of 8,000 people in the middle of nowhere. And actually my family was involved in politics back to the 1860s -- not the 1960s, the 1860s. My great grandfather was an elected official in the state of Missouri for 3years. And when he died, his obituary said that at that point he had the national record for longevity in elected office. We don't know if that's true, but it might be. My dad was on city council in my hometown, my two brothers were on city council. And you'll laugh when I tell you this, but I was not interested in politics in junior high and high school. In fact, my life ambition in junior high and high school was to be, are you ready for this? A bass singer in a gospel quartet.

[laughter]

CM: Wow. You're surprising me.

GS: I was a big fan of the gospel quartets, and partly that was because I grew up in a very strict religious evangelical Pentecostal home where rock and roll was not accepted. And so my version of rock and roll that I listened to was actually gospel quartets. And by the way, they were very close to Elvis, as you know Elvis said.

CM: Yes.

GS: He picked up a lot of his moves and everything from being close to the gospel quartets. In fact, the Blackwood Brothers sang at his funeral at Graceland.

CM: Right.

GS: So that's a long way of saying that even though politics in my family has a little bit of a genetic aspect to it, I was not in high school at all interested in politics.

CM: So what was the first campaign that you got involved in? How did it start?

GS: The first campaign I got involved in was I was in college. I went to college in 1969, and in 1972, a friend of mine who was a lawyer in my hometown in Montana, decided he was gonna run for the state Legislature and asked me to run his campaign. I don't know necessarily why, probably because my family was involved in politics. My dad, my brothers. So that was really the first campaign I ever ran. I was 2 years old and it was a campaign, by the way, against the sitting Republican speaker of the Montana House of Representatives.

CM: So you went up against the Republicans from the very first campaign?

GS: Well, my first three campaigns were against an incumbent Republican speaker of the House in my home state, then an incumbent president of the United States, Jerry Ford, and then against an incumbent Republican senator, Chuck Percy.

CM: Okay. You said you grew up in a conservative Pentecostal evangelical home. How did you get on the Democratic side? Where did the progressive...

GS: Well, even in high school, I didn't buy into all the evangelical stuff. I was gonna say crap, but and once I left home, I left that religious tradition and went off on my own. Became an Episcopalian actually. So, when in college though, remember I went in 1969, Richard Nixon has been elected. The Vietnam War was raging. And so when I went to college, I got involved in the Impeach Nixon movement and Stop the War movement and the whole thing. That was really my first nexus with politics. And then of course, it kind of caught on and you know the rest of the story.

CM: But you ended up working for a presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter. Tell us about that.

GS: 1976.

CM: Yeah, tell us about that first experience. And you went pretty far for a young guy at that time.

GS: Well, I was... I graduated from college in the fall... In the spring of '76 during the presidential year, and I had helped get Carter on the ballot in Montana by collecting signatures when I was in college. He just interested me, I just thought, a peanut farmer from Georgia and I thought that partly because he came from a small town, Plains, Georgia, and I came from a small town in Montana. He just seemed like kind of out of the mode of the typical presidential candidate, not from a... Not from a big state. And so I was just really interested in him as a person and as a candidate. And so I helped to get on the ballot in Montana. I did not do the primary campaign because I was still going to college, and I graduated that June. But a friend of mine who ran his primary campaign was a farm kid. Still a friend of mine. And he couldn't do the general because they were harvesting at his farm. And so he had to opt out and recommended me. And so I got a call one day out of the blue, would you like to run the Carter campaign in Montana? And two days later I was in Atlanta at a national staff meeting. I was the youngest of 5state

coordinators. I just turned 25. Really had no idea what I was doing. But it was really what got me started in politics nationally.

CM: What was the biggest lesson you learned out of ... being thrown into a presidential campaign in your early 20s? There must have been some lessons there that you have used throughout your career. Were there?

GS: Well, there were, but I'll tell you the most critical thing that happened in that campaign was really the beginning of the religious right. And what happened was, back in those days, there was no internet, there were no cell phones, weren't even pagers. And one day, so the Atlanta headquarters would communicate with me through Western Union with telegrams, the yellow envelopes...

CM: Wow. That seems...

[laughter]

GS: With the yellow piece of paper inside. And one Saturday I'm in my office and the Western Union guy with a cap and everything comes through the door and hands me this yellow envelope. And I rip it open and it said, tomorrow on his show, there's this evangelical preacher who's going to come out and blast Jimmy Carter. And I thought to myself, "Wait a minute, Jimmy Carter is like a born again Christian, the first one ever to run for president who was self-admittedly born again."

CM: Right.

GS: And I thought, "Why would they be blasting Jimmy?" I mean, he's a Sunday school teacher, he is a born...

CM: That's right. Yeah.

GS: And what we didn't know at the time was that was really the beginnings of their so-called religious right, where these right wing preachers started to have at least some impact on politics. And we know that...

CM: Right.

GS: That just it, you know, propounded geometrically over time.

CM: Right.

GS: So that was really, and I didn't, no one knew it at the time, but that's really where the religious right got its start, was in that campaign.

CM: Yeah. I mean, and but after the Carter campaign, you ended up coming to California?

GS: No, no. I went to Washington.

CM: Oh, Washington first.

GS: Oh yeah.

CM: Tell us the trajectory and how'd you end up coming to California?

GS: Well, that's a very long story. How much time do you have?

[chuckle]

GS: I came back to DC, I drove back in my car with three bald tires out of four, 'cause I couldn't afford to replace all the tires in the middle of the winter. By the way, it was December.

CM: This was a pre-lucrative political...

GS: It was December...

CM: ...consultant day.

GS: ...of '76.

CM: Yes.

GS: I didn't have a job promise. I just drove all the way from Montana to Washington DC and bunked with a friend there for a while. And was finally hired by the DNC as Midwest Regional Finance Director. And I helped with the transition as well, although not as a paid staffer, but I was in the transition office a lot. And that's really where I got my start in national politics in DC, and I lived there for 10 years. And then, in 1978...

CM: Yeah.

GS: The White House Political Office asked me to go to Illinois to run a US Senate campaign against Republican incumbent Chuck Percy. And I really didn't wanna do it because I just moved to DC. I had a nice place in Georgetown and all that, but when the White House calls, what are you gonna do? So I moved to Illinois for a year and ran a US Senate campaign, and then came back to DC and was hired by the Secretary of Agriculture as a special assistant. I did a lot of advanced work for him.

CM: Yeah.

GS: And a lot of field organizing stuff.

CM: Yeah.

GS: Went into 27 states on his behalf.

CM: Wow. Okay.

GS: Unfortunately, that was before the frequent flyer program started, but, so that's really kinda where I got my start in national politics with the

Carter campaign in Montana...

CM: Yeah.

GS: DNC, Senate race in Illinois, and then coming back to work for the Secretary of Agriculture.

CM: Okay. And then who drew you out here to the West Coast?

GS: Well, I lived in DC for 10 years.

CM: Right.

GS: When the Carter re-election thing failed...

CM: Right.

GS: I went to work for the National Association of Realtors and was there for about five and a half years. Vice president of political communications. I handled all the communications for legislative and political stuff.

CM: Yeah.

GS: Not the institutional stuff.

CM: Right.

GS: Like, have you hugged your realtor today?

CM: Right.

GS: But legislative and political.

CM: Right.

GS: And I did all their independent expenditures across the country in both US Senate races and house races.

CM: So you were learning the...

GS: Both Democrat and Republicans, by the way.

CM: Yeah. You were learning the basics.

GS: Totally.

CM: Money.

GS: In different states.

CM: Yeah.

GS: In different states. And I kind of had had it by the time, '87 rolled around. And so I left, went to Australia for a month and bummed around. And then I was planning to move to California. That was my intention. But I got caught up into this national search process that the governor of Ohio had instituted to

get a communications director. And I did not want to live in Columbus. I had handled Columbus and Ohio, by the way, both at the DNC and at the realtors.

CM: Yeah.

GS: So I'd been there a lot, but it just was too... I got offered the job. It was too good of an opportunity. I mean, Dick Celeste, brilliant Rhodes Scholar. And he was just coming into the vice chairmanship and then chairmanship of the Democratic Governor's Association with Clinton as his predecessor, international traveler, did a lot of trade missions all over the place. And former director of the Peace Corps under Carter. And so, he was term limited out in '91, had to leave office. He'd already been reelected to a second term. So I decided I can gut it out for three and a half years in Columbus. So they did, and then the minute he was out of office, it's go rent the U-Haul and never look in the rear view mirror and come to California.

CM: But why California? And by the time you got here then, you had a pretty good sense of how campaigns work at various levels.

GS: Oh, completely. Yeah.

CM: How finance works, et cetera.

GS: Completely. Yes.

CM: So what was the draw out here?

GS: Because I first came to California as a six-year-old to be the ring bearer at my oldest brother's wedding.

CM: Okay.

GS: We drove down from Montana in a 1951 Nash with no air conditioning in July, 'cause the wedding was on July 5th, with my parents, my grandparents, me and two of my brothers in the car.

CM: Yikes.

[chuckle]

GS: With no air conditioning in July.

CM: And you still liked California.

GS: But, well, but it's the first time I'd ever seen a palm tree. First time I ever saw the ocean. And I just completely fell in love with it. I mean, bizarre as it is to say now. I even loved the smell of the smog, which was very thick back in those days. Very acrid. But the smell of the smog was... Kind of bizarre. But...

CM: So you came here to LA, was that a U-Haul?

GS: It was LA, yeah.

CM: Okay. And that's where you meet up with, of course, Gray Davis, somebody who you would end up assisting for so many years. How did that happen? How did you...

GS: Well, interestingly enough, when I came to California, I was ready to chuck it in politics. I was taking rock drummer lessons as hard as that is to believe, unfortunately, I found out that my hands and my...

CM: Actually, do you have any pictures of yourself?

GS: My hands and my feet couldn't operate independently of one another, which is kind of what a drummer has to do. So that didn't work out. I was gonna write screenplays, the typical California thing, right?

CM: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

GS: Living at the Chateau Marmont and all that.

CM: Being a Scorsese movie I think, yeah.

GS: But what happened was I got here and I didn't have a job. I didn't have any clients. And I was still basically on unemployment from Ohio because I got fired by the new incoming Republican governor, right?

CM: Right.

GS: 'Cause I was a political appointee. And my first campaign job here was actually a campaign for a county supervisor here in LA County, biggest county in the country. Bigger than 42 states, by the way.

CM: Right.

GS: In terms of population against another incumbent. So as you can tell, I'm not one who went out and found easy campaigns of incumbents running for reelection. I took on a lot of incumbents in my career.

CM: Right.

GS: Unlike a lot of consultants who take on well-funded incumbents, so they can run up their win-loss record.

CM: Right.

GS: So I...

CM: And which campaign was that?

GS: Gordana Swanson.

CM: Right.

GS: Running against incumbent Deane Dana.

CM: Okay.

GS: Who is a, who is a male.

CM: Okay.

GS: A Republican woman, by the way, but Dana was a Republican, so it was a Republican versus Republican runoff.

CM: Okay.

GS: She was a pro-choice woman. That was my first campaign, by the way, for a female candidate that I'd ever done.

CM: Ah, okay.

GS: And learned a lot of lessons there. And then from that, I was offered the communications directorship for Mike Woo's campaign for mayor.

CM: Oh, yeah.

GS: In 1993.

CM: Right.

GS: And so I was his communications director in both the primary and the runoff against Dick Riordan. And then that's what led Gray Davis to offer me the job to run his Lieutenant Governor's race.

CM: You actually have said that the Woo campaign against Riordan had a lot of parallels to [Rick] Caruso. The...

GS: Totally.

CM: How, just how so?

GS: Because you had a liberal Democrat running against a Republican male, a rich Republican male. I mean, it was, Mike was Asian.

CM: Right.

GS: But it had a lot of parallels to this last mayoral election.

CM: Right, right.

GS: And I will say that, unlike Rick Caruso, who a lifelong Republican who switched parties 15 minutes before he filed, and then was running ad saying, 'I'm running as a proud Democrat.' Right? For 15 minutes. Riordan actually retained his Republican partisan affiliation during the whole time and got elected.

CM: Right.

GS: But...

CM: You had your revenge with Riordan later...

GS: That is how I got my fill of Richard Riordan, by the way. And by the way, he passed away. I mean, God rest his soul.

CM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GS: But all of the accolades that he got when he passed away, and I don't want to malign the dead, but not a nice man. He'd hurt a lot of people in his career. And an alcoholic. Had drunk driving arrests. We found out in the mayor's race from 1969 to 1989, that is not a youthful indiscretion. That is a lifelong misuse of alcohol. And there's a very complicated story I can tell you about how he tried to cover that up during the mayor's races, which is where I really realized how totally unethical the guy was. But I did get him later, as you all know.

[laughter]

CM: Yes. We're gonna get ... But you said after the Woo race, that's where you met Gray Davis.

GS: Well, what happened was...

CM: Yeah.

GS: ... Gray Davis remember, had, you know the history. In 1992 after I moved here, Gray Davis ran for the US Senate against Dianne Feinstein in the Democratic primary.

CM: Rather infamous attempt.

GS: Now, I had nothing to do with that campaign. I had never met Gray Davis. I knew his background. I knew he'd been Jerry Brown's chief of staff. I knew he was the controller, but I'd never met the guy. And so after the '92 campaign, by the way, he used as consultants in all of his races for the Assembly twice...

CM: Right.

GS: ... Controller, twice. And then US Senate, Mike Berman and Carl D'Agostino, BAD Campaigns, that's what they called themselves. That was the old, kind of the machine that Mel Levine and Berman...

CM: Right.

GS: Congressman Berman had put together, and they flamed out in the '92 race because to my chagrin and horror, they never did polling or focus groups. They didn't believe in it. They pulled everything out of their ear. Or someplace lower on their anatomy and when I went back and looked at the spots that they ran on Gray's behalf and that Senate primary in '92, they were the worst spots I'd ever seen in my entire life, including the one where he equated Dianne Feinstein to Leona Helmsley.

CM: One of the worst political mistakes...

GS: Who had just been indicted for, tax evasion and all kinds of other things.

CM: Right.

GS: And so what happened, Gray, he almost self-immolated in that campaign. Not only did Dianne Feinstein kick his rear end, but the negativity of the campaign. I mean, he had endorsements withdrawn, newspaper endorsements withdrawn, organizations. And when I came on board to run his lieutenant governor's race and I started meeting reporters, they thought he was politically toe-tagged. They thought that was the end of Gray Davis. You know?

CM: Yeah.

GS: Or he'll never repair himself.

CM: Yeah.

GS: But what he did to his credit was, he jettisoned Mike Berman and Carl D'Agostino and put together a whole new team, me to run the campaign, David Axelrod to do the media, who then ended up as you know running, doing, doing all the media for, Bill Clinton ... Paul Maslin to do polling because Gray had never done polling before. And so he put together a whole new campaign and got a new start, a fresh start, and I had to come in and kind of repair the damage. And I'll tell you with reporters, it wasn't easy because they literally thought the guy was politically dead.

CM: Yeah. It was...

GS: And there was a lot of skepticism and I said, oh no, he can pull, he can do this. It's a lower, it's not governor. It's...

CM: Right. And it was also, you had another challenge, in that, it was a year or an era in which this was a historically poor time for Democrats. Correct? I mean, it wasn't a great...

GS: Well, '94 was tough.

CM: It was tough, right?

GS: I mean, Kathleen Brown was our nominee for governor. She gets beat by 15 points at... She's got the ballot position right above us on the ballot. Right? And we lost every statewide office except two, controller and lieutenant governor. Kathleen Connell. We lost the Congress for the first time since the 1950s.

CM: That's right. That's right.

GS: So it was not a good year for Democrats, and we knew it wouldn't be, we knew it wouldn't be. But one of the funniest stories is that, when we all came on board, we told Gray, "Look, we have to focus group, our spots. You didn't in '92, and you almost killed yourself politically." And you know, Gray being resistant to new ideas, "Goddammit, I've never done a focus group. I don't even, who are these people that get in there, you know, I don't..." And we said, "Gray, you got to focus group the ads, okay, you almost killed yourself with unfocused group spots that were horrible in '92. You got a focus group." So at that point, they only were \$4,000 a group. Now, they're like \$12,000 well... But we're talking about 30 years ago, basically. So, but anyway, the funny story was, so he finally reluctantly agreed that he would fund

focus groups, but only if we did it in conjunction with Dianne Feinstein, who was running for re-election in '90, for the full seat. So I called Bill Carrick, and I said, "Look, I know you guys are probably doing your own focus group, but Gray won't do focus groups unless we have somebody else help pay for the \$4,000 a group." So he threw in, I think, 1,000 bucks or something like that. He came to the focus groups, Bill Carrick, who was Dianne's consultant, as you know.

CM: Yeah, long time, right. Exactly.

GS: But anyway, so we set up the first focus group, it's at a facility out by LAX, and Gray demands to come. And we said, "Grey, candidates don't come to focus groups, okay? We do a full report... "

CM: 'Cause they can be brutal.

GS: "But we push people, we push people with really negative information about you, and you don't wanna hear it, because, it's gonna be disconcerting to you." And he says, "Goddamnit, I'm paying for it, I can come for." So we said, "Okay, fine." So he came to the first one, and you know how a focus group room is, right? There's a kind of a board room with a long table, and then a two-way mirror, and then you're all standing... You're all sitting behind the two-way mirror. So Gray comes, and he takes the chair and he puts it right up against the two-way mirror, so his face is right up against the two-way mirror. We're all sitting in the back, and Paul Maslin is the moderator during the focus group, and at one point, you kind of lead people into this. First of all, you talk about what concerns you, and what are the issues on it. Well, I'd like to talk about some candidate things today, right? So he says, "I wanna talk to you about Gray Davis, the state controller. You may not know much about him, he's in his second term and all that."

GS: And so, he starts going around the room saying, "What are the impressions you have of Gray Davis, if any?" And most people said, "Well, you know, he signs the checks I get, my retirement checks 'cause the controller signs every state check." So his name's on it. But comes down the row, and there's one guy who says, "I don't know much about him, but I do have a real question about him. Is that his real hair, or is that a toupee or a wig? He says, I never, I just can't imagine anyone's got hair that's perfect." And then a guy across the table says, pipes up and says, "You know that's right." He said, "I've always had the impression that if somebody dropped an atomic bomb on the United States of America, the only thing left standing would be Gray Davis' hair." And Gray's listening to all this in front of the mirror, and he like, backs up, and you know...

CM: Horrified. Horrified.

GS: You know what? During his entire career, the 10 years I worked for him, he never ever came to another focus group!

[laughter]

CM: Oh, too much.

GS: He learned his lesson.

CM: I mean, when I go back and look at the stories about that campaign, he's always described as this unexciting staid candidate, not a lot of sex appeal. How did you work with that? And that was something that he's gonna... He had to deal with his entire political career.

GS: He did. And I have a lot of regard for Gray. I worked for the guy for 10 years, but when I took over his lieutenant governor's race, and we brought this new team in, we had dinner with Gray here in LA, 'cause he lived in LA, lived in West Hollywood, as you know, and we were trying to draw out of him some personal factors that we could use in the campaign. And so, somebody asked him, "Gray, can you tell us some stories?" 'Cause remember, he was born and raised in New York, and then he moved out here because his dad worked for Sports Illustrated. They moved to Pacific Palisades. Dad was wealthy. He was part of the Conoco air, the oil fortune. And then lost all the money. But anyway, another story. But, so, we said, "Gray, tell us some interesting stories about yourself." We're thinking about something that would be relatable to the average voter, right?

GS: So, he tells us a story. I couldn't make this up. He says, "Well, you know, when I was in high school -- 'cause he went up to Harvard, which is now Harvard-Westlake -- and it's a private military school, basically. He says, "You know, I think for my 16th or 17th birthday, my dad bought me a red Corvette." And he said, "I'll be damned the thing was stolen off the street, Pacific Palisades. And they never found it. So, my dad bought me another red Corvette. And I'll be damned if that wasn't stolen off the street too. So, he bought me a third red Corvette." And now, we're political operatives sitting there thinking, let's see, we're trying to find some relatable personal characteristics or personal story that we can put in spots about the guy. And that ain't one of them.

[laughter]

CM: Or he's been a crime victim too.

[laughter]

GS: And so, we're thinking to ourselves, you know, we might have trouble dragging personal factoids out of this guy that we can use in the campaign. And his dad, when Gray went to Stanford the first year, his dad divorced his mom and left and went to Florida with some woman 30 years younger. Left her with five kids. And so there was some personals, but Gray didn't want to get into that 'cause it was too family. And it was like his dad was an alcoholic. He didn't want to... He just wasn't one who divulged a lot about himself, you know, and...

GS: And there's a follow on to this because when he ran for governor, I knew the guy was a Vietnam veteran. He joined ROTC at Stanford, Reserve Officer Training Corp. And he did it because his dad had left. And he was at Stanford, an expensive school, and he needed money. So he waited tables at his frat house for money and ROTC, you had a monthly stipend. But the payoff was, you had to go get in the military for two years when you left college. That was what... So when he left Columbia Law School, he went to Vietnam for two years. Right? A Columbia trained lawyer going to Vietnam.

CM: Yeah.

GS: And so I knew he was a veteran, but he had never used it in his previous campaigns. And the reason was...

CM: And he was awarded a Bronze star.

GS: Bronze star.

CM: In Vietnam.

GS: Yes.

CM: Yeah. No small thing.

GS: But when I asked him about it, running for, not lieutenant governor, but running for governor when the stakes were a lot higher. I said, great, we've gotta use the veteran thing here because it inoculates you against worked for Jerry Brown, soft on crime, all that kind of thing. And he said, "No, no, I don't wanna emphasize that." He said, "I got... I had friends over there, got their legs blown off and got killed and the whole thing. And I just... I was in the helicopter most of the time repairing radios." He was in the Radio Signal Corps. And so to his credit, he didn't want to blow this thing up, like I'm a war hero, because he was in the Signal Corps. He wasn't in the trenches, firing at...

CM: Yeah. But...

GS: ... the Vietcong. And I said, "Gray, I don't care if you want to or not, we're gonna use it because we have to. It's what makes you different." And by the way, Dan Lundgren, who was our ultimate opponent, was a five-time draftee from it. He was a Donald Trumpy. His dad was Richard Nixon's personal physician. Did you know that?

CM: Yes. Yes. That's right. Yeah.

GS: And he got Dan Lundgren out of service in Vietnam by claiming he had bad knees while Lundgren is out surfing off the coast of Long Beach the whole time. Right?

CM: That's right, I do remember that. Yes.

GS: So I said, we gotta do this, we gotta do this. And Gray had never joined VFW, he'd never joined the American Legion.

CM: Wow

GS: So I signed him up. Used campaign checks to pay the dues, got him the caps signed...

CM: And that became a big part of the campaign.

GS: Signed him up at the American Legion Post down here, I forget which one it was, and a VFW post in Sacramento. So he had two different outposts. Right? And he hated to wear the caps because it messed up his hair. But anyway, so basically, I mean, ironically, I forced this thing about, and we used it in our spots. You remember our spots?

CM: No, they were very, yes. Very successful. And this was no small...

GS: Decorated Vietnam War veteran, which he had never said or used before in a campaign, but boy, it was like dragging him kicking and screaming into it.

CM: And it was a daunting task. I mean, we should know. He won the landslide victory as lieutenant governor, which was a challenge considering where Democrats were at the time. But as you have written about getting a candidate from lieutenant governor to governor, there's no small task in California that, in the entire history of the state, only three had done it. Correct? I mean...

GS: I know that fact very well.

CM: Yeah. I mean, talk a little bit about the biggest concerns you had as he decided to declare for governor. What was the landscape like at that time?

GS: Well, luckily, we had a Republican governor who was term limited out. Pete Wilson couldn't run again in 1998. So we knew it was an open seat. We weren't running against Pete Wilson. I'm not sure we could've beaten Pete Wilson. But it was an open seat. And we decided that far from shying away from the fact that he'd been a lifer in government at that point. Right? We decided to focus on that. And so our ads, if you remember, and by the way, Phil Trounstine, God rest his soul...

CM: Yeah. Right.

GS: ... at the Mercury News wrote profiles of Gray in one of which he said, the best trained governor in waiting that California's ever had. So we...

CM: Right.

GS: That was a pull quote for us.

CM: Yeah,

GS: And our ads emphasized his entire background, chief of staff to a governor, member of the state Assembly, state controller, now lieutenant governor, so it wasn't just that he was lieutenant governor. I mean, it wasn't like Eleni Kounalakis who never did anything in government, except now she's lieutenant governor. So we had a whole history and we founded focus groups. That was very impressive. People, they go, well, he knows his way around up there, and the one thing we found too was that, people equated being lieutenant governor to being vice president, and people would say, 'Well, he's been second in command up there in Sacramento.' Now you know how little power the lieutenant governor has. And we worked under a Republican governor who never gave us anything to do and tried to throw us out of the Capitol. Right? Throw our office out of the Capitol. So it was funny when we would hear people in focus groups saying, 'Well, he's been second in command up there.'

CM: As it, and on that respect, I mean, has voter's mentality changed? Because today, you talk about a candidate who's been...

GS: No, I don't.

CM: In the Legislature, like...

GS: Totally different.

CM: Voters have to... Right?

GS: We're talking about 2years ago. And it was totally different environment.

CM: Yeah. Back then, it was respected.

GS: Totally different environment. And people did give him credit for knowing he knows government, he's been up there and he's been second in command and he's done a lot of things in government. And he worked for a governor and all that, but you couldn't do that today. It'd probably kill you.

CM: Right, but then he had to face off against some challengers, who had money and...

GS: \$60 million they spent. Yeah.

CM: Yeah. So let's talk about, that primary was really interesting. Jane Harmon, Al Checchi. Did you think you were gonna come outta that alive?

GS: Initially, I did not. But what happened was Al Checchi, who at that point was the owner of Northwestern Airlines, spent \$40 million out of his own pocket. And by the way, that doesn't maybe sound like a lot today, but that \$40 million was more money than anyone had ever spent in any statewide campaign in the history of America at that point in time.

CM: Wow.

GS: \$40 million.

CM: Yeah.

GS: In a primary campaign.

CM: Yeah.

GS: But he, Checchi, basically won it for us by going after Harman, Jane Harman, Congresswoman Jane Harman, who also was wealthy and put \$16 million of her...

CM: ...husband's money.,,

GS: .. husband's money into the race. Checchi decided to go negative after claiming he wouldn't right up front. He said, 'Negative campaigning is turning off voters. I'm not gonna go negative. I'm gonna tell my story and if they don't buy it, I'll accept defeat.' And then, he got pissed off and partly because of me. And decided to run a smash-mouth campaign against both Jane Harman and Gray Davis. And we found in our polling, which we were doing, we were doing a lot of tracking.

CM: Right.

GS: That there came a time about the end of April where his negatives just started to spike because people were sick. And by the way, in focus groups, when we would focus group his ads with the big screen up on the wall...

CM: Right.

GS: And Paul Maslin, who was moderating the focus groups, would say, 'Now I wanna show you some spots from one of our opponents. Al Checchi, you might have heard of him. And he used the remote and he turned the spot on.' And there's Al Checchi's face. So people go, oh, no, not him again. I'm so tired of seeing his face on my TV. So we knew he... the wear rate as we call it in spots, he had reached the point where the wear rate was extreme. People were sick of seeing him on TVs. He was on, he went on TV by the way, November 17th. November 17th, 1997. And did not go off until the day before the primary. He was on TV on Christmas Day, on New Year's Day, on Easter Day. And people were sick of seeing him on TV.

CM: We're always welcome.

GS: And so basically, somebody I think called this a murder-suicide. A murder-suicide. Right. He tried to kill Jane Harman and Gray Davis and ended up committing suicide himself, politically. So, I mean, we kicked his butt.

CM: But in...

GS: We got 35 percent to his 13.5 percent.

CM: Right. And were you worried about Harman because, she was a respected congressperson and part of her campaign was that she was the only woman running in a macho field of men. Was there, what happened? Wasn't she a threat to you at any point?

GS: We never thought so. And the reason is, California. In my home state of Montana for almost three decades, there was one at-large member of Congress. So in other words, our member of ... now, there are two because the population went up. So a member of Congress from Montana ran in the statewide, just like a US Senator did. Right? So, when they would run for US Senate, they were running in the same constituency they represented. California had 52 members of the Congress. She was one of 52. Now, she might've thought she was a big deal in her own mind, but in 51 other congressional districts, nobody had a clue who she was. And she was completely unprepared. You might've been there, Carla, but her first outing after she announced for governor was downtown in LA here at a...

CM: Oh yes.

GS: LA Town Hall.

CM: Right.

GS: And she was there with David Dreier or somebody, some Republican, I think member of Congress to talk about...

CM: Yeah, it was David Dreier.

GS: Federal issues.

CM: Right.

GS: And reporters are like there to see, okay, well this woman was running for governor, right? So she comes out, and I was there too, as was Bill Carrick, who was doing the campaign.

CM: Right.

GS: And she comes out of the ballroom and reporters start gang banging her, "Congresswoman Harman, what do you think about California's water problems?" Remember what she did? She goes, "No, no, no. I'm not ready to talk about state issues yet. I'm not ready you know... "

CM: Yes, I do remember.

GS: "That's not what this forum's about. I'm not ready to talk... " "So, well, you just announced for governor? What do you mean you're not ready to talk about state issues?"

[laughter]

GS: She didn't know what she was doing. She had no idea what she was doing.

CM: Yeah. There's that...

GS: And she literally thought, because she brought on Feinstein's campaign team, that somehow that would elevate her to the status of Dianne Feinstein and it clearly didn't.

CM: Yeah.

GS: Yeah. She made all kinds of mistakes. So...

CM: I also remember being present at debate, Dan Lungren was there.

GS: Yes. Because it was an open primary.

CM: That's why.

GS: Not top two. But it was an open primary.

CM: So talk a little bit about that. Gray Davis had to make his case. There's some pretty snazzy electric people with a lot of money there on the stage checking stuff like...

GS: Well, I just think Davis looked, in the context of that panoply of candidates, Gray Davis looked pretty solid. He wasn't flashy. That's true. But he looked pretty solid. He knew what he was talking about. He's quite articulate. He's not electrifying, right? We would admit. But he looked pretty solid. He looked pretty solid. And the funniest thing about the debates was the one at the LA Times...

CM: Yeah.

GS: George Skelton is on the panel with...

CM: Right. I was there. Yeah.

GS: Somebody else. And if you remember George Skelton asked Checchi, because at that point he'd run tens of millions of dollars in negative ads, smacking Jane Harman and...

CM: Right.

GS: And so good old George Skelton says, "Mr. Checchi, I have a question to ask you. When you started your campaign, you said you weren't gonna go negative because negativity was turning off voters. And it's why people, the voter turnout was low. And you'd rather just make your case positively. And if people don't like it, they can vote against you and the whole thing. And now you've been running like tens of millions of dollars of smack ads right against your opponents. Why did you change your mind?" Now bear in mind that if you're the audience, Checchi was here, Gray was here, Harman is here, and Lungren was here...

CM: Right, right.

GS: At the podiums, right? So Gray was right next to Checchi. And Checchi jutted out his jaw and pointed over at Gray and said, "Because the campaign managers of some of these other candidates had been giving me guff for months. And I just decided to fight back." And Sharon Davis and I are sitting in the front row and I looked at Sharon and we both chuckled and I said, he's talking about me! I got the 113th richest man of America to blow his stack and go negative and kill himself on the air because of the shit I said about him in the media, right?

CM: Yeah, you were pretty relentless with that.

GS: Well, remember the Al Checchi book and Gordon Gekko and the whole thing.

CM: Yeah, you really went after him. And of course, we know the ending here. Davis was elected. I looked up, by the way, our lead on the next day's story, which kind of talks about some of the challenges you had going forward. Gray Davis, the plodding tortoise of California politics was elected governor last night.

GS: Look at that cartoon.

CM: Yeah, there you go. That's it. But I mean, it was one of the biggest wins ever for a governor's race. Was it not? I mean...

GS: Well, first Democrat in 20 years...

CM: First Democrat in 2 years.

GS: Since [Jerry] Brown was elected in '77 for re-election.

CM: That's right.

GS: Yeah.

CM: Okay, from that moment on, am I right in that, Davis, did he ask you to be chief of staff or did you?

GS: He did. Because I had been his chief of staff as a lieutenant governor.

CM: Right, okay. But you said no.

GS: I'd rather shoot myself. I hate running big organizations with all the personnel problems. I mean when I worked for the governor of Ohio as communications director, I had cabinet rank. Me and the chief

of staff had cabinet rank. The only two staffers who did. And I saw from the inside how a chief of staff spends a lot of their time, chastening cabinet members who step out of line and disciplining staff and listening to complaints and all that. And it's like, I'd rather shoot myself. He was pissed off that I wouldn't become chief of staff. He didn't talk to me. He didn't talk to me literally between, well, right after the election until he was sworn in. And I went to the inauguration. He wouldn't talk to me.

CM: Really? Oh, wow.

GS: He was pissed off.

CM: But still you advised him. You became a very important adviser to him. And he was going to need a lot of advice because the energy crisis came along.

GS: Correct.

CM: I mean, this was such a complicated policy issue. Didn't have a precedent, but it had enormous impact. At the kitchen table for somebody in California, just talk a little bit about the energy crisis and the kind of political challenge that posed for you and for Gray Davis.