
Reviews

Oliver North: Less than 'A Perfect Candidate'

by Edward Spannaus

"The whole thing was a media game . . . and we were part of that game." That is probably the most telling statement uttered by one of the directors of the new film *A Perfect Candidate*, which was screened for the Washington, D.C. 10th Annual International Film Festival on May 1.

The film purports to be a documentary on the 1994 race for the U.S. Senate in Virginia between Oliver North and the incumbent, Charles Robb (D). While the film has its occasionally insightful moments, it utterly fails to convey the reality of why Oliver North, initially considered a shoo-in over the scandal-ridden Robb, ended up losing the race.

The source of the film's inability to give its audience any understanding of what actually happened in the 1994 race is not mysterious. First, the filmmakers spent much of the campaign riding around the state in North's campaign van. Anyone familiar with that campaign knows that North's handlers only allowed him to appear in public at well-prepared events, where he would be surrounded by adulatory crowds. On those occasions when North came face-to-face with opponents, or in which he had to talk spontaneously, he invariably blundered, so that by the end of the campaign, his handlers refused to even give his schedule out to the press. Riding around in the North RV was no way to get a real picture of the campaign.

Second, and worse, the film views the campaign through the eyes of the *Washington Post's* Richmond reporter, Don Baker. Baker is a cynical, contemptuous individual, writing for a paper which serves as the establishment censor of what citizens are allowed to know and not know. Baker and the *Post* consistently lied throughout the 1994 campaign; so, to view Baker as an "authority" on North, Virginia politics, or anything else, is a fatal blunder.

By cutting out the role of the LaRouche movement and, specifically, of the Defeat-that-Son-of-a-Bush committee headed by LaRouche Democrat Nancy Spannaus, the film cannot possibly explain what happened to North. It was the "SOB" committee which saturated the state with material exposing North as a drug-runner, a liar, and as a would-be destroyer of Social Security. When the Democratic Party was moribund, and no one else would do the job, the SOB committee catalyzed opposition to North throughout the summer of 1994.

The SOB committee put out a pamphlet detailing North's service to the "secret government" apparatus created by George Bush in the early 1980s, telling how he got his start in Central America from Henry Kissinger, and documenting his role in creating and protecting the Contra guns-for-drugs apparatus which was flooding the United States with illegal drugs in the mid-1980s. Twice, the SOB committee sponsored tours by former U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent Celerino Castillo, who had first-hand knowledge of massive drug-smuggling by North's pilots in Central America. This material had two main areas of impact: It gave others the courage and ability to go after North on the drug-running issue, and it peeled off a lot of support from North among the so-called "Christian right" community, which had been dominated by Pat Robertson and his Christian Coalition.

In the closing weeks of the campaign, the SOB committee saturated northern Virginia and the Tidewater area with leaflets, and livened up the airwaves with radio ads featuring the "Good-bye Ollie" song. Except for one article covering the "Good-bye Ollie" ads (written by a local reporter, not Don Baker), readers of the *Washington Post* didn't get a clue as to what was going on in the streets. SOB organizers could sense the growing popular antagonism to North, and were not surprised by his defeat. Others, especially those who got their news from the media, were.

Only once does the drug issue come into prominence in the film: This is in a segment from the Sept. 6, 1994 four-way candidates debate, in which former Gov. Doug Wilder brought up the fact that people around the state were worried about drugs, and he asked North, "How could you ride on a plane with drugs being on the plane?"

North responded angrily. "The fact is, governor, only you and Lyndon LaRouche are raising the issue of drugs," he said, claiming that this had all been already investigated. Wilder replied: "Well, I don't know about Lyndon LaRouche, but I can tell you, if there had been an investigation, I have not seen it. The people of Virginia have not seen the results."

North repeated that it was only Wilder and LaRouche who were making these charges, and added, "I'm the most investigated man on this planet." Wilder shot back: "There might be very good reasons for that to be the case." That exchange, reflecting the key issue, is the high-point of the film.

Otherwise, despite its glaring deficiencies, the film at times provides a useful glimpse behind the public mask of the North campaign, portraying the depravity of North's campaign manager Mark Goodin, and Goodin's cynical manipulation of North's public image. For every speech that North delivered with the patina of boyish sincerity, there was Goodin coldly preparing the script, and deliberately playing upon the susceptibilities of the public and the gullibility of the news media. But while occasionally savaging his handlers, the film puts a gloss on North himself, while portraying Robb in the most unfavorable light.

"A Perfect Candidate" is a perfect coverup.