

FILM REVIEW

Shoring Up a Campaign With Mud That Sticks

By JANET MASLIN

THE PERFECT CANDIDATE

"Who're you going to vote for, the flu or the mumps?" asks a voter in "A Perfect Candidate," a fine, trenchant political documentary on a par with "The War Room." In this revealing film about Virginia's 1994 senatorial campaign, that voter's frustration seems an all too reasonable response to the choice he faces. What's more, the film finds the seeds of a profound cynicism everywhere in its account of the race between Oliver L. North and the incumbent, Senator Charles S. Robb. It would be hard to find a more chilling view of the American electoral process than what "A Perfect Candidate" captures on screen.

Unlike "The War Room," which was buoyed by the manic enthusiasm of the Clinton team, "A Perfect Candidate" (which opens today at the Film Forum) takes an essentially dark look at the business of political campaigning. As directed by R. J. Cutler (a producer of "The War Room") and David Van Taylor (director of "Dream Deceivers," a wrenching documentary about the trial of the rock group Judas Priest for encouraging teen-age suicide), this film finds both grim humor and real tragedy in the events that unfold.

The tragedy is America's, since the film shows in graphic detail why glib, destruc-

tive tactics have become an indispensable part of campaigning. "Look, the winners write the history on this stuff," says Mr. North's campaign strategist, Mark Goodin, who becomes one of the film's pivotal figures. "And in the end, the negative stuff sticks and it works. I should never ever have forgotten that." Embittered by the events seen here, he adds ominously, "I won't ever make that mistake again."

Mr. North is riding high as the film begins, disarming voters everywhere he goes. To build a crowd, all he has to do is stand still. ("You can't buy that," one of his aides crows.) His charisma is so real that it prompts the same kind of Elvis comparisons applied to Bill Clinton: Mr. North, too, can seem beguilingly sincere and make each of his listeners feel like the most important person in the room. Memories of Iran-contra won't go away, yet he still wins a strong grass-roots following with his show of serious political commitment.

In contrast, there is Mr. Robb, easily made to look ludicrous not only by the film makers but by Don Baker, a Washington Post reporter on the campaign trail. Interviewed by Mr. Baker as he shakes hands outside a factory, Mr. Robb cannot explain his position on the replacement of striking



Barry Baron/Seventh Art Releasing

Oliver L. North greeting a crowd during his unsuccessful senatorial campaign in 1994.

workers, except to say that it remains unchanged.

Elsewhere, Mr. Robb is seen awkwardly cornering a voter in the soup aisle at a supermarket ("May I just shake hands, and then you can go ahead and make your selection?") and floundering badly in a debate with Mr. North and other candidates, including former Gov. L. Douglas Wilder. Mr. Robb isn't sure whether to say he wants religion kept out of politics or politics kept out of religion. "I'll get it right," he stammers.

A liberal spectator like Mr. Baker finds

himself grudgingly impressed by Mr. North's relative skill and effectiveness, especially as it compares with Mr. Robb's empty-shirt persona. And the North advisers, with their frat-boy complacency, are confident that their candidate has an edge. But then the tide starts to turn, and the campaign gets ugly. Race cards are played so heavily that Mr. North finds himself linked by Robb commercials to David Duke and the Ku Klux Klan.

And political exigencies make themselves known as Mr. Wilder, despite a visible loath-

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ing for Mr. Robb, appears at a Democratic fund-raiser with President Clinton and agrees to lend Mr. Robb his support. Soon Mr. Robb can be seen making an ostentatious visit to a black church and behaving like the whitest man in the world. Ads attacking Mr. North's trustworthiness and emphasizing his Iran-contra role also take a much nastier turn.

The North team grasps these changes much too late, despite the much-vaunted campaign acumen that Mr. Goodin developed as a protégé of Lee Atwater's. And Mr. Goodin, who is often startlingly candid with the film makers, delivers the kind of pronouncement for which this tough, troubling documentary will be remembered:

"Getting people elected, whether we like it or not, it's not pretty, but getting people elected has a lot to do with dividing. . . . It's like busting a big rock. You try to chip off your piece and then break the rest of it into so many smithereens that they

A PERFECT CANDIDATE

Produced and directed by R. J. Cutler and David Van Taylor; director of photography, Nicholas Doob; edited by Mona Davis; released by Seventh Art Releasing. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 105 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Don Baker, Mark Goodin, Charles S. Robb and Oliver L. North

don't matter.

"But that is different from what it takes to govern. Because what it takes to govern is all about finding consensus on difficult issues and bringing people together — people who don't always agree — under some sense of common purpose. And we are obsessed with getting people elected, and we are obsessed with the show. And so are you, or you wouldn't be here.

"So we provide daily entertainment. What we are not providing is serious solutions to what's going on in the country. Not us, not Chuck, not Clinton, not Bush. Not anybody."