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Oliver North campaigns in a scene from the documentary "A Perfect Candidate."

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Robb-North: Virginia's Wilderness Campaign

Film Explores '94 Senate Race

By Marc Fisher
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The filmmakers knew they were in danger of violating every dramatic law ever written.

In retrospect, "The War Room" had been a simpler task, R.J. Cutler thought, recalling his documentary about the 1992 Clinton campaign. When you're making a movie about a presidential campaign that inspired and energized its staff, when you're telling the story of a soaring victory, the dramatic gods are on your side.

But who would be the hero in the Oliver North-Chuck Robb Senate race? For all their assumptions about what great fodder the 1994 Virginia campaign would be for another documentary, Cutler and co-producer-director David Van Taylor soon found themselves haunted by the reality one voter had summed up this way: "Devil or demon? Flu or mumps, which disease do you want?"

"A Perfect Candidate," which opens Friday at the Key Theatre, manages to turn the chronicle of a classic lesser-

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CANDIDATE, From G1

of evils campaign into a movie about the need to believe, about the persistence of hope and trust in democracy, even amid a plot dominated by cynical back-room manipulators and deeply flawed candidates.

The vehicle for that turnabout, improbably, is what most filmmakers these days would consider a standard dramatic symbol of cynicism and mistrust, a political reporter for a big newspaper, in this case, the real-life Richmond bureau chief of The Washington Post, Don Baker.

Baker, 63, is a rumped, bearded, scraggly haired newsman, a 26-year Post veteran, a mainstay in the state capitol, a prickly presence in the lives of the politicians he's watched come and go.

The longer Cutler and Van Taylor followed the candidates, the more they realized that this man who peppered the campaigners with tough questions at every availability was, curiously, resented and respected by both Democrats and Republicans.

Baker dogged the candidates not only because he was a newsman, but also because he was a Virginia voter. He wanted to get past the easy public images of the two Marines who would be senator.

Here's this guy who has this complex relationship with North," Van Taylor recalls. "Ollie latched onto Don because he was the embodiment of the liberal media. But then Don also turns out to be Chuck Robb's nemesis. And then we discover that Don's a cynic, but he's also an idealist."

Baker, the directors realized, could be the chorus in their Greek tragedy. He could be someone to root for, someone to identify with, someone to ask the questions the viewer would want to ask.

They needed Baker to cooperate every bit as much as they had needed North and Robb.

But Baker was a throwback, an old-fashioned reporter with no desire to be a celebrity, no lust to fob off his own opinions on the public in TV's ritual shouting matches. A good newspaperman is a fly on the wall. Unencumbered by the bulk of cameras and the glare of TV lights, a reporter like Baker can hang back, absorb the cam-



BY ROBERT A. REEDER—THE WASHINGTON POST



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R.J. Cutler and David Van Taylor, left, acknowledge that their movie "The Perfect Candidate" might have caused a bigger stir if Oliver North—above, with Bob Dole and strategist Mark Goodin—had beaten Sen. Charles Robb. Post reporter Don Baker, right, covered the campaign and is a reluctant player in the film.



paigned, and pass on his observations to readers.

To be the star of a movie about a campaign he was covering would grate against Baker's instincts. And Cutler and Van Taylor—cronies who had attended Harvard together in the early 1980s—knew it. For weeks, they kept their plan to themselves.

They would film Baker at news conferences, stick a microphone into the back of a van where he was shooting the breeze with his colleagues.

"They just said they wanted some background on us," Baker recalls. "But as the lawyers would say, 'there did come a time' when it was obvious to me that they were devoting more attention to me than to the others. A lot of time when I thought they ought to have the camera on Ollie or Chuck, they'd have it on me."

"It was a long process of approach," Van Taylor says. "We struck up a friendship."

Baker was uneasy. He consulted with his editors in Washington, who had misgivings about anything that could interfere with Baker's reporting on the campaign.

But Cutler and Van Taylor "kept pushing the envelope," Baker says. They would ask Baker a question or two and before he knew it the camera was rolling. To allay Baker's fears, the directors offered to show the reporter what they recorded of him and let him veto any material he felt went over the line.

"They appeared to be genuine," Baker says. "Though I don't know to this day what would've happened if I'd ob-

jected to something they thought was critical to the film."

Baker did set one hard limit. Despite the filmmakers' repeated entreaties, Baker refused to wear a microphone. "That would be too much cooperating," he says. "I wasn't going to do something that I wouldn't ordinarily do in my job."

And so, here is Baker, not only asking questions, but commenting, reflecting, divulging opinions he'd spent a career keeping to himself. Some who've seen the film have concluded that Baker is a classic liberal, a label the reporter reflexively rejects.

"I don't think I say in there I'm a political liberal," he says cautiously. "I'm uncomfortable that people are drawing a conclusion. The way I really feel is, a pox on both their houses."

Labels aside, Baker's contribution to the film is his honesty about the disillusionment of being a person of political faith at the end of the 20th century. In one of the most riveting scenes in the movie, Baker is driving along a street, mulling Cutler's question about who he admires.

"Over the years, I've admired different politicians," the reporter says slowly, "but then they've always done something to lose my admiration. So, who's the last politician I still admire?" There's a long silence. And then: "Oh, I don't know," and his voice trails off.

Baker's openness is of a completely different kind from that of the candidates.

Officially, both Robb and North cooperated with the filmmakers. North let the cameras in on strategy sessions.

late-night post-mortems and ragged end-of-day bus rides. But North was savvy enough to let his strategists do the talking. The candidate remained wary, watching his words every time the camera switched on.

"Ollie's always on guard," Cutler says. "He's had a camera in his face since 1986. He's always on, always putting on a show for the world."

That can make for a magnetic campaign, but a rather canned-feeling documentary. Cutler: "You want to think there's the campaigner and then so much more else. We never saw a so much more else with Ollie."

So it is North's main operative, the jocular cynic Mark Goodin, who becomes the main character from the North camp. Goodin bares all for the camera: his gleeful snickers at his opponent's misfortune, his crass disrespect for the voters, his manipulation of the media. But by film's end, Goodin has degenerated into a Sad Sack. He seems disgusted by his own inability to believe in anything.

As Cutler says, "Mark doesn't know how to believe anymore. He's lost."

As for Robb, he was, from the start, an afterthought. If anything, Van Taylor and Cutler had to downplay Robb's incompetence as a campaigner. One powerful scene toward the start of the movie says it all: The camera follows Robb up and down the aisles of a grocery store, moving ever more quickly as the senator searches in vain for someone, anyone to shake hands with.

When he finally corners an uninterested shopper, Robb painfully introduces

himself and wanders away. The encounter is excruciating to watch.

North, in contrast, is a thrill to be around, so much so that the liberal filmmakers found themselves feeling illicit pleasure just watching Ollie connect with the voters—and with the crew from "A Perfect Candidate." North would flatter Cutler with quotations from his favorite scenes in "The War Room," and wow the crew with references to his favorite documentaries.

The associate director, Mona Davis, was so upset by her attraction to North's charisma that she had a nightmare in which the Kennedys came to her and accused her of betrayal.

"I tried to say, No, I'm not drawn to him, but the fact is, as a leader, yes, I was," Cutler recalls. "As someone I would pull the lever for, not a chance. But you see the devotion. At the end of the day, we'd feel, God, let's get out of here, because we felt that conflict."

To this day, the filmmakers grow uncomfortable when asked if they were rooting for North to win, if only to make their movie more marketable. "I, I, I, it's—Oh, it's complicated," Cutler says finally. "I can't really remember. Well, I was conflicted. I wanted the film to be as successful as possible. It was a fear, if he doesn't win, maybe we won't have a compelling story. It probably would have been the story of Frankenstein."

"We definitely thought the film would have more commercial appeal if Ollie had won," Van Taylor says.

As it is, "A Perfect Candidate" is opening at art houses in several big cit-

ies; the producers are still trying to land a public TV or cable deal.

The fact that thousands of people will hear Don Baker ruminating on politics, revealing his personal views, still jars his sense of professional duty. But after a career in newspapers, wedded to ideals of fairness and objectivity, Baker finds himself more open than he once might have been to the idea that another medium can offer a different kind of truth.

"Sometimes we are so committed to fairness in coverage that we give an inaccurate picture," he says. "Robb just could not draw flies in this campaign, but we would write as much about what Robb said to five people as we would about what Ollie said to 5,000 people. Is that accurate? Of course, on the other hand, as it turned out, that was probably the right thing to do, because Robb won."

In the newspaper, Baker says, he could never write straight out that this was an election between two very flawed candidates. "What we could do in the paper is call some guy and say 'Aren't these guys flawed?' and they say, 'Oh, yes, they're both very flawed,' and you put that in the paper."

The filmmakers picked up on Baker's frustration with the limits of his craft, and gave him an outlet. "Don said to us so many times that as a reporter, you can't cry 'bull' in a crowded theater," says Cutler, whose next project is a talk show with John Hockenberry on the new MSNBC cable channel. "Don had a lot to say, the same way Mark Goodin had a need to make this film. It's not so much naivete as a need to say something that makes them open up. The only reason you can make films like this is because these people have a need to express something."

"In Don's case, there really was a conscious element to this desire," says Van Taylor, who's working on a six-part PBS series on the religious right. "The last time we shot him, he thanked us for giving him this opportunity."

In "A Perfect Candidate," Baker joins the voters in a struggle that, despite the gutter tactics and ingrained cynicism of those inside the system, turns into a refreshingly, surprisingly pure search for what's best for the country.

After the opening at the Filmfest DC this spring, a Robb aide told the filmmakers he was struck by Baker's role, shocked that the reporter was anything other than a pure cynic: "He's really an idealist," the aide said. "He really believes in democracy."

"That's why we needed Don," Van Taylor says.

And perhaps Baker didn't give up his cherished professional neutrality after all. At the initial screenings, the directors asked audiences how they thought Baker himself voted in '94: Robb or North? The result: an even split.