

The Permanent Campaign

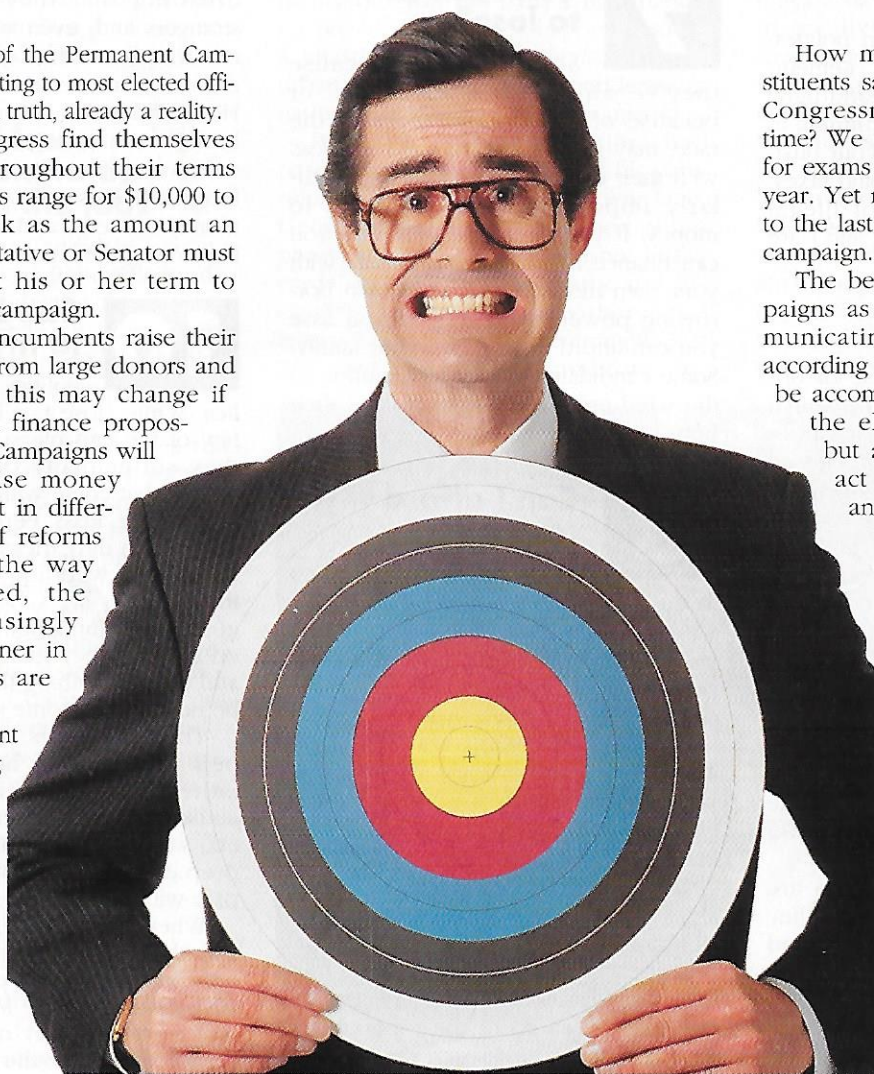
Running for re-election starts the first day of your term

by Robert Blaemire

The concept of the Permanent Campaign is daunting to most elected officials but is, in truth, already a reality. Members of Congress find themselves raising money throughout their terms in office. Estimates range for \$10,000 to \$16,000 per week as the amount an average Representative or Senator must raise throughout his or her term to finance a typical campaign.

Traditionally, incumbents raise their campaign funds from large donors and PACs. However, this may change if current campaign finance proposals become law. Campaigns will be forced to raise money and build support in different ways. Even if reforms do not change the way funds are raised, the press is increasingly wary of the manner in which campaigns are financed.

It's easy to point out what is wrong with traditional campaigns and their funding. Solutions are not so easy but they do exist. Campaigns can solve these problems with time and creativity, which is only possible if a campaign is willing to write a plan, set a timetable and stick with it. Procrastinators need not apply. A good re-election plan requires early decisions and takes *two-way interactive communication with voters.*



**In changing times,
it's target practice
on unprepared
incumbents.**

How many times do we hear constituents say they only hear from their Congressman or Senator at election time? We tell our children not to cram for exams and to study throughout the year. Yet most incumbent officials wait to the last minute to organize a formal campaign.

The best approach recognizes campaigns as permanent affairs. By communicating continually with voters according to a written plan, much can be accomplished that not only makes the election season less difficult but allows the elected official to act more like a public servant and less like a candidate.

The Permanent Campaign does not require a campaign headquarters or full-time staff. It is designed to accomplish tasks that make re-election easier. These include:

- Raising money and building a large database of small donors
- Adding information about voter concerns to allow targeted contact with them
- Eliminating from future communications the costs of reaching voters who are in opposition

To start the Permanent Campaign, it is necessary to create a database that can be used for continuous direct mail communications. The essential element is response mail, for soliciting views and opinion as well as money or indication of support.

By constantly adding response data

to the database, future mail can be varied to a great extent, strengthening the bond being established between candidate and voter.

For those voters who are added to a donor database, their value over time is easier to demonstrate. The importance of the small donor will be enhanced, however, if Congress and state legislatures further limit individuals and PAC contributions. A large list of small donors is also a basis for continued fund raising in subsequent campaigns.

By building a database early and enhancing it regularly, candidates avoid the necessity of recreating the file prior to the campaign season. Their campaign communications can then be more selective with more varied messages; also, voters will grow accustomed to receiving mail from the candidate.

A well-executed program may not scare off all opponents, but it will create a foundation for a successful re-election campaign and send a message that the candidate is serious about keeping his or her job.

Fund Raising

The most appealing aspect of this plan is fund raising. Raising money through the mail takes time; messages must be tested among a variety of prospects. Once a donor is found, he or she needs to be sustained over time and continually upgraded.

But candidates should also recognize, unlike most national fund raising mail they have seen, there must be political value in direct mail for funds because the recipients are also their voters. Those who do not give will remain voters and, ultimately, it is their votes that win elections.

A fund raising database requires:

- The ability to segment the voter universe properly
- Enhancements necessary for fund raising, such as modern cluster systems based on current census and individual data
- Effective fund raising mail materials
- Management of financial and donor information for legal reports and for sending appropriate "thank you's"

All of this can be handled without a permanent, full-time staff. It will require an efficient approval process of test and copy by the candidate so that a strict schedule of mailing can be followed.

An additional option is telemarketing. The same requirements exist: a good database, a fulfillment process for the money, efficient approval of script and so on.

Database Creation

Prior to raising money or soliciting views of the voters, a database has to exist. This can either be an existing voter file or one created from scratch. In some cases, alternative databases have to be considered because voter files are too expensive or difficult to obtain. There is, however, no place in America where an adequate database cannot be created.

It is critical to enhance files with data necessary for relevant communications. The extent of your ability to target segments of the voter universe will be a function of the amount of data available. That data may be voter history, ethnic identification, age, race, gender, income, and census-based cluster information. The more selective and precise your targets can be, the more your message can vary.

Segments have to be created on the file not only to test direct mail, but also to extrapolate the results on to the non-mailed universe. For instance, when a certain household type responds well to a mailing, further mailings would be mailed into households with the same profile. Each piece of information gained from one mailing will be used to make subsequent mailings more efficient.

Database Management

The database is a living thing. It changes over time with new information. Returned mail will result in deletions from the file. Antagonistic responses will result in the coding of those households so no mailings are sent there in the future.

The outcome of this process is the building of an excellent voter file in time for the election. The mailings during the campaign season would be done far more efficiently because of the updates on the file during the preceding period.

Data gained from response mail would include:

- Issue preferences
- Candidate preferences
- A willingness to volunteer time or to undertake certain tasks in the campaign

Therefore, useful information would be continually added to the database and used in subsequent mail.

Cost

The cost of the entire Permanent Campaign process would include:

- Creation and maintenance of data base

- A plan and schedule for implementing the Permanent Campaign
- Design and writing of the mail
- Production of mail
- Caging, cashing, and "thank you's" for donor mail
- Providing appropriate legal compliance report information
- A monthly retainer

Every dollar spent in the non-election period is worth at least two spent during the campaign season.

As they build grass-roots support at a time when the competition is not active, candidates can get the attention of voters when they aren't competing with other campaigns. They can create a dialogue with voters that will not only help them win re-election but make them better elected officials as well.

An election is like a "one night stand" with the voters. The Permanent Campaign is more like a marriage.

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