

THE *Senator* AND ME

WORKING FOR BIRCH BAYH

ROBERT BLAEMIRE

When I left Indiana in 1967 for George Washington University in Washington, D.C., I knew I was heading to an exciting place, to the center of political power in the nation and to a different life than I had known. But I would never have imagined the course my life would take because of the people I met there, the way they changed me, and the profound lessons I learned about our country from the opportunities given to me by a U.S. Senator from Indiana—Birch Bayh.

I took a bus from George Washington to Capitol Hill to visit the U.S. Senate for the first time and to offer my services to Bayh, still in his first term in office. I had no illusions that what I was offering was anything greater than interest and enthusiasm, but I felt strongly that if I were to enter a political career, this was the best place to start.

Arriving at the Bayh office, I was told he was having an open house later that day so I decided to come back at that time. I had never met a senator (never even seen one) and this was exciting beyond belief. After heading back to George Washington

for lunch but taking the wrong bus and seeing parts of Washington with which I was not yet familiar, I eventually returned to my original starting point and discovered that it was almost time for the open house.

I was able to meet the senator and told him that I wanted to work for him. Bayh introduced me to a staff member who took down my name and the telephone number of the pay phone at my dormitory. For anxious weeks I awaited his call and when it eventually came I was invited to come to the Senate the next Saturday to begin my volunteer job.

I was with two other George Washington students I had never met. Arriving at the Senate office, we trooped downstairs to the cafeteria for coffee and an explanation of the job we were being asked to do. Coffee was an issue, however, because I had never drunk any. Treating it with a large amount of cream and sugar, the sweet drink was palatable and I avoided being seen as immature. The job dealt with transcribing vote totals by precinct from previous elections and putting the numbers on computer forms for some sort of computerized analysis project, later referred to as Operation Dig. The project



was to be used in Bayh's 1968 re-election campaign. Doing political tasks on Senate property was not frowned upon then as it should have been or is now and the irony in this assignment has not been lost on me. For the past thirty-five plus years I have worked computerizing voter files for Democratic campaigns, so handling voting summaries and getting them computerized on my first day in politics feels like a wink from the universe.

I came to the office for this project as often as I could and soon began running errands and taking on other tasks that members of the staff were happy to avoid. In that way, I became the volunteer people wanted around; I did the things they did not want to do. Eventually, the other student volunteers stopped joining me. The project ended but by then I was heavily into learning about the office, how it was run, and becoming friendly with the staff. Bayh regularly walked through the office when heading to the Senate to vote, stopping at desks to chat with the staff and volunteers. I was starstruck and remember how those moments fueled my desire to be there more and more. The Senate had become more important to me than college.



Bayh is besieged by supporters at Ball State University during his re-election campaign in 1968 when he defeated his Republican challenger, William Ruckelshaus, capturing 51.7 percent of the vote. Bayh lost his Senate seat in the 1980 election, losing to future vice president Dan Quayle.

I returned home for the summer, working in a number of mind-numbing, hard-labor summer jobs. Returning to Washington for my sophomore year, I felt a resolve to become more important in Bayh's Senate office. When I was offered an opportunity to drive in the senator's car with other staffers to Indianapolis to work on the final days of the re-election campaign, I jumped at the chance. Driving people to the polls on Election Day was the first time I worked in a political campaign—the first of twenty-five cycles that defined my life's work. Staying in the group house most of the campaign's men lived in was almost like a large fraternity house, and the energy and conversations there were exciting beyond belief. The

most indelible memory of that first trip was spending election night in the Bayh hotel suite with the family and a few other staffers; a memory that has remained indelibly with me. It was the first time I met the senator's wife, Marvella, and their twelve-year-old son, Evan.

While I was home for Christmas 1968 the senator's secretary called and asked me if I was interested in arranging my classes so I could drive the senator to and from his office. He viewed that time as an extra hour of work during the two commutes. And, I could keep his car! Not having a car myself made that sweetener unique but being able to spend private time with the senator was the real reason I accepted her proposal with alacrity.

We began driving to and from the Senate together in January 1969. Both of us found a great deal to talk about and rather than work on many of those drives Bayh chatted with me about baseball, movies, politics, and history. We established a friendship that grew, deepened, and remained until his death. I helped Evan warm up for his baseball games (he wanted to become a pitcher), played basketball with him, and even served as his babysitter. Since he was thirteen, it was not what one would think of when describing babysitting, but more like hanging out with a younger brother or cousin. With his parents out for the evening, and he an only child, I would come to the house and spend the evening. Sometimes I would bring a date along. Bringing a young woman to a senator's home for the evening was a way to impress her and those dates never cost me a dime.

Looking back, it was clear that I *was* almost playing the role of an older brother to Evan, being only six-and-a-half years older and being someone who shared his interests in sports. When Marvella invited me to lunch with her at a French restaurant, something I had never experienced, I felt more a part of the family, and a welcome addition at that.

In Bayh's office I began the year opening the mail in a little alcove just outside the Senate attic. Later I became the assistant to the office manager and soon showed him that I had mastered Bayh's handwriting and could sign the mail in a manner that looked more like the senator's writing than the office manager could do himself. With 500 letters a day, there was no way he or any senator could read and respond to every letter personally and it was necessary to have them signed, folded, stuffed, sealed, and mailed by the staff. Many offices used an autopen to handle the signing of the mail but my personal touch could replicate the senator's and I

had, as a result, made myself more important in the office.

Driving with Bayh every day allowed me to witness up close the intense and exciting debates of President Richard Nixon's nominees to the U.S. Supreme Court. Bayh led the opposition to two in a row,

Clement Haynsworth (1969) and G. Harrold Carswell (1970), and both failed to be confirmed. That had never happened before and has not happened since. It gave Bayh a national spotlight that created a buzz about a possible presidential candidacy.



Photos showing Bayh during his days as a law student at Indiana University, Bloomington, in the late 1950s with his wife, Marvella, and young son, Evan. Bayh, who received his law degree in 1960, received an honorary degree from IU in 1995 and his senatorial papers are housed at the university's Herman B Wells Library.



A young Birch Bayh, circa 1968.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, BALL STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES



ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, BALL STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES



IPS, WINFIELD K. DENTON PAPERS, M 681



INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA



INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA



ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, BALL STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Clockwise from Top: Bayh addresses delegates at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago; detail from photograph of Bayh and other newly elected senators being sworn into office by Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1963; and Bayh speaking to a crowd of Ball State students during his try for a second term in office, September 26, 1968.

Clockwise from Bottom: Employees at Muncie's Warner Gear Plant Number One talk with Bayh during his 1968 re-election campaign; Bayh and Robert F. Kennedy appear during a September 18, 1966, fund-raising event for Evansville congressman Winfield K. Denton; Bayh (at right) claps as President John F. Kennedy waves to the crowd gathered for a congressional campaign rally at Indianapolis's Weir Cook Airport, October 13, 1962; and Bayh (back row, right) poses with other members of the editorial board of IU Law School's law review.

Bayh began exploring a presidential campaign throughout the remainder of 1970 and well into 1971, traveling the country relentlessly, raising money, hiring staff, and working tirelessly, trying at the same time to keep up with his Senate responsibilities. There were endless trips to television stations for interviews and the number of articles written about him nationally increased almost daily. It was

exciting for me, but I also had to maintain my own responsibilities, both in the Senate office and in college. After graduation in June 1971 I could turn my attentions full time to the Bayh campaign.

I always assumed that I would follow college with law school, pursuing a vocation that was expected of someone who wanted to seek political office. While applying to law schools after taking the

law boards, I was increasingly concerned about Bayh's presidential effort, which was becoming a reality. Beating Nixon in 1972 seemed like something that could be accomplished. How could I possibly go to law school if my boss was an active presidential candidate? It made me ask myself whether I really wanted to be a lawyer or not. I had always planned on becoming one but as a means to a politi-

cal end, not because I wanted to practice law. It soon became clear I did not really want to be a lawyer, so going to law school made no sense. I wanted to be involved in the campaign, quite a unique opportunity now that I had a close, personal relationship with a potential president.

When I told the senator about my decision, Bayh appeared troubled. He told me he would be happy to have me in the

campaign, but he did not like the fact that it was his ambition that might stand in the way of further education for me. He said I clearly did not have to go to law school but I would have to agree to pursue some additional education before he would agree to have me join the campaign. I did, and eventually obtained a master's degree in legislative affairs from George Washington to go with the bachelor's degree I

earned in political science.

In October 1971, however, everything changed. Marvella was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had taken her to the hospital and was in her room when the doctor came in to tell her and the senator the bad news. After she endured a mastectomy, it became clear to Bayh that he could not pursue a cross-country presidential campaign while his wife was recovering



Bayh speaks to reporters outside the U.S. Supreme Court on June 30, 1971, following the court's decision overturning the Richard Nixon administration's attempt to restrain the New York Times and Washington Post from publishing a top-secret report on the Vietnam War, known as the Pentagon Papers.

from cancer. He announced the end of his campaign.

A staff shake-up after Bayh returned to the Senate as a noncandidate made me the office manager at the age of twenty-two. Our office, frankly, was not always run well and the new staff leadership was determined to change that. My role was once again more important than it had been and we all felt the operation ran more

smoothly over the next two years.

After providing an opening to Communist China and negotiating a treaty with the Soviet Union, Nixon was unbeatable in 1972 against his Democratic challenger, George McGovern. It was probably a good thing that Bayh was not the candidate. I attended the Democratic Convention with him in Miami, and our focus shifted to his re-election campaign,

this time against Indianapolis mayor Richard G. Lugar, thinking it would be the most interesting thing to happen in 1974. Of course, we had no idea what the brewing Watergate scandal would mean two years later.

My role in the campaign would be very different than it had been in the Senate office. I became the roadshow manager, often referred to in politics as the “body man.” We began traveling together throughout 1974, starting in June. For 153 days, with only three days off, we hit the road. A Bayh campaign can only be described as aggressive. As a physically fit forty-six-year-old man, he kept up a pace that would be hard for most candidates to replicate. We traveled 90,000 miles, mostly in a twin-engine aircraft, without leaving the state, except for events in Chicago, Louisville, and Cincinnati, all Indiana-related media hubs. The road show included twenty-five county fairs in a state with ninety-two counties. Only a few times did the senator return to Washington. I have often described the experience as one I would never trade for anything—or repeat. It is hard for me to compare it with any other experience in my life and the fact that it ended in victory made it sweeter.

Watergate turned into the biggest scandal in American history, leading to the only presidential resignation ever and making it very difficult for Republican candidates everywhere in 1974. It certainly made our task easier in a campaign facing the best and most qualified candidate Bayh ever faced. Lugar would go on to defeat Indiana's other senator, Vance Hartke, two years later. Not only did Bayh and Lugar find themselves as colleagues in the Senate, they became close friends and worked together on several important matters over the final four years of Bayh's tenure in the Senate.

For me, I had tasted Indiana politics



COURTESY ROBERT BLAEMIRE

A college student who worked for Bayh remembered that when he first met him he said, “Hi, I’m Birch Bayh,” and stuck out his hand. He didn’t say, “Hi, I’m Senator Bayh.” He was such an open guy. It didn’t make any difference to him that he was a senator. He was an ordinary guy, a welcoming guy.”

up close. I knew the players, the geography, the history, and the politics. Going back to being office manager was never a consideration. I would join the office's Indiana department—the staff who handled casework, federal projects affecting the state, and Indiana politics, including the management of the Indianapolis office and staff in the state.

But as the country faced another presidential election in 1976 with an incumbent, Gerald Ford, who was damaged by his pardon of Nixon, we started hearing once again from Democratic leaders around the country that Bayh should seek the presidential nomination. Throughout 1975 the senator met with people urging him to run. At one point I remember him confiding in me that only I could understand how bone-tired he was from the campaign. It was really hard to think about starting over. I was only twenty-five

but felt that fatigue as well.

Nonetheless, by the fall, Bayh decided to make the effort and we announced his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in October 1975. I accompanied him at the announcement at his farm in Shirkieville, Indiana, then flew around the state to repeat the announcement at each of Indiana's media markets. It was a long and exciting day.

I had been asking myself if I had it in me to become the roadshow manager again, this time in a national campaign. I dearly wanted to do it but was asked instead to go to Indiana and prepare for the May primary. We all knew that most of the contenders (Georgia governor Jimmy Carter, Arizona congressman Morris Udall, Washington senator Henry Jackson, Oklahoma senator Fred Harris, Pennsylvania governor Milton Shapp, and former ambassador Sargent Shriver) would not compete in Indiana. They would concede it to Bayh but another contender may not. Alabama governor George Wallace had run previously as an independent and had done well in Indiana. He might view it as a place where he had nothing

to lose. And, if he did, we imagined there might be national attention focused on a Bayh-Wallace contest and a possible televised debate, something that could elevate Bayh's stature in the party and nationally. My efforts were focused first on obtaining the necessary petition signatures to have Bayh's name added to the ballot. To do that required building a staff structure that would bolster our political muscle in Indiana.

The senator competed in the Iowa caucuses in January with the results being “none of the above” coming in first, Carter second, and Bayh third. The next month was the New Hampshire primary, with Carter coming in first, Udall second, and Bayh again third. In the subsequent Massachusetts primary, Bayh's showing was so poor that he dropped out of the race. I was called that evening and told to return to Washington. Walking out of the elevator into the campaign headquarters, the senator was standing there, hugged me, and said it was strange to make such an important announcement in his life and not having me nearby. It was an emotional time.



COURTESY ROBERT BLAEMIRE

An important part of Bayh's legislative legacy involved his work on behalf of equality for women, including his landmark Title IX measure outlawing federally-funding education institutions from sex-based discrimination. “Getting women equal education was [more] important than anything else except perhaps giving them the right to vote,” Bayh told a reporter.



COURTESY ROBERT BLAEMIRE



COURTESY ROBERT BLAEMIRE



COURTESY ROBERT BLAEMIRE



SENATORIAL PAPERS OF BIRCH BAYH, INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Clockwise from Bottom, Left: Bayh (far right) jokes with members of his Indianapolis staff; the author and Bayh meet with Hollywood legend Kirk Douglas (far right); Bayh meets with U.S. Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, with whom he developed the Bayh-Dole Act dealing with patent rights; and Bayh poses with his son, Christopher, and wife, Katherine, at the dedication of the Birch Bayh Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Indianapolis, 2003.

When Senate life returned to normal, there were several staff departures and I became the head of the Indiana department. At age twenty-six I was Bayh's chief political adviser and found myself managing a large number of people and assuming a growing list of responsibilities. When Carter won the presidency, Bayh was Indiana's only statewide-elected Democrat and everyone who wanted a federal job in the new administration had to come through me. It would have been overwhelming enough but I also took on the process to determine who would get our office's allotment of tickets for the inauguration in January. These two roles found me getting

sixty to seventy letters a day and an equal number of phone calls. I was told to hire a personal assistant and as hectic as my life was, I loved every minute of it. That same month, I took on the job of managing the campaign to get Bayh's Equal Rights Amendment ratified in the Indiana General Assembly. Bayh had been the author of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment on presidential succession and disability and the Twenty-Sixth Amendment lowering the voting age to eighteen. As the only person to write more than one constitutional amendment since the founding fathers, he was the author and chief Senate sponsor of the proposed Twenty-Seventh

Amendment, the ERA. We were successful in Indiana but it was the last state to ratify the amendment before the statutory time for ratification expired. The next four years remain with me as a series of vivid memories. There are so many stories that emanate from those times. With our casework we were able to help hundreds of Hoosiers; with our work on federal projects, Indiana's face changed significantly, including a modernization of Indianapolis. Politically, we were involved in a campaign in 1978 to replace the Indiana Democratic chair with one of our own, a successful effort that I managed as well. We felt our politics was

being handled well and Bayh's standing in the state was as strong as ever as we faced re-election in 1980. Little did we know that we would face a political environment with double-digit inflation, double-digit unemployment, double-digit interest rates, gas lines, hostages in Iran, and an unpopular president. We felt our opponent, Congressman Dan Quayle, was perhaps the weakest Bayh had ever faced, but we were running in the worst year for Democrats in which he had ever campaigned. Election night 1980 saw Ronald Reagan defeating Carter in a landslide in the race for president. Republicans gained twelve seats in the Senate, one of which was Bayh's.

I look back on my more than fifty-year relationship with Bayh, who died on March 14, 2019, with many amazing memories. There was personal heartache that we shared—when Marvella's father killed his wife and himself, when Bayh's father died, and when Marvella experienced cancer and seemed to recover only to have it return and kill her in 1979. There were fabulous moments that make us proud—stopping the Haynsworth and Carswell nominations, the successful passage of two constitutional amendments, passage of Title IX, numerous pieces of legislation to help women and the institutionalized, measures for civil rights, and the Bayh-Dole Act, dealing with patent rights crafted with the cooperation of Republican senator Bob Dole of Kansas. We saw Evan Bayh elected Indiana governor and then to the U.S. Senate in the seat held by his father.

When I arrived in the Senate, Birch Bayh was my hero. He became my mentor and later my friend. He will always remain so.

Robert Blaemire is the author of the book Birch Bayh: Making a Difference, published by Indiana University Press. After Bayh's election defeat in 1980, Blaemire

formed a political-action committee, the Committee for American Principles, to combat the influence of the New Right in American politics. In 1982 he began a long career providing political computer services

for Democratic candidates and progressive organizations. An early participant in the rise of big data, he owned and managed Blaemire Communications for seventeen years. •



COURTESY ROBERT BLAEMIRE

Remembering Bayh after his death, Blaemire said that he could say that the senator "never lost his sense of decency or modesty. We virtually never saw him lose his temper. All former staff members will testify that you could not have a conversation with him without hearing him describe how important you were to him and his efforts in the Senate."