

Only in Delaware

POLITICS AND POLITICIANS IN THE FIRST STATE



Celia Cohen

Carper in the last treasurer's race.

There also was name-calling — literally. Democrats sniped that Rzewnicki's name was "alphabet soup," too confusing for the voters. Her name was pronounced "Rez-NICK-y," except downstate, where some confused politicians there came up with their own way of saying it, calling her "Rez-NIT-ski," as though she were something out of the Kremlin. Still, Rzewnicki had the last word on that one.

"They can't pronounce it. They can't spell it. But they can remember it," she said.

Finally, the auditor's race also had the ingredients for a slugfest. It was a rematch of the 1980 contest in which Republican Thomas W. Spruance had defeated Democrat Dennis Greenhouse. Like the treasurer's post, the auditor was shifting from a two-year term to a four-year term with this election. Greenhouse got help from some of Spruance's employees, who went to the News Journal newspapers with tales of their boss coercing them into working on his bid for re-election.

Down and down the nastiness spilled, until it reached what had to be rock-bottom in a campaign for a state Senate seat. It was detailed in sordid splendor by Ralph S. Moyed, the News Journal papers' political columnist.

Moyed wrote about an ugly campaign in a suburban Newark district between Thomas B. Sharp, the Democratic incumbent who one day would be the Senate president pro tem, and John J. Czerwinski, the Republican challenger. Sharp in those days was a sheet metal foreman and Czerwinski a pipefitter, both with union ties. The campaign deteriorated into the destruction of yard signs, which were being torn down, run over and painted over. It was so bad that Czerwinski unleashed a sign patrol to try to protect his signs, which had cost him upwards of \$1,000.

Then it got worse. The Czerwinskis' pet rabbit, kept outside in a cage, turned up dead. It was named Gonzo, after a Muppet puppet popular on television at the time. Because Gonzo's sudden death occurred on a night of particularly heavy sign damage, it seemed suspicious.

Moyed put it in semi-serious perspective, writing, "Considering the nature of the 1982 campaign, voters should not be shocked to hear allegations of leporicide or a call for an investigation into the sudden and puzzling death of a pet bunny."

As sour as the campaign season was, it did not become a shocker until three weeks before Election Day. At that point the rumors that had been bubbling in the congressional race between Tom Evans and Tom Carper broke not in Delaware, but the New York Post.

"The dirtiest campaign in the country is being waged in tiny Delaware," the Post reported.

The newspaper recounted the sex scandal involving Evans and then went where no news outlet had gone before, airing charges that Carper had been abusive toward his wife and his stepson and stepdaughter. The allegations had

arisen as part of a custody fight between Diane Carper and her ex-husband and were supported by a taped interview of the children and a copy of a legal deposition that Tom Carper gave, acknowledging he had slapped his wife once. The deposition never was officially entered as a court document.

“It appears that Carper has a few skeletons in his own closet — that have been a dirty little secret of Delaware politics,” the newspaper wrote.

As if any more proof was needed of how polluted the atmosphere of this campaign season was, it was there with the tabloid intrusion of the New York Post — or what Moyed in his political column called “the home of ‘Mother Eats Her Baby’ journalism.”

Up to this point, The News Journal had resisted running a story about Carper’s marriage although well aware of the charges. In fact, the reporting was done, and a debate had raged in the newsroom for weeks about whether it should be printed. Even after the Post wrote it, there were reservations. Then the matter was taken out of the local newspaper’s hands. Tom Carper issued a statement. There was no longer any question there was a news story here.

Carper’s campaign was rocked. It had been going so well, and now this. Carper, still a Naval Reserve flight officer, was on active duty at Willow Grove, Pa., when he heard that the New York Post was asking questions. “You’re feeling good, and then you’re just reeling,” he said.

In the statement Carper denied the charges of abuse and tried to shift the focus back to Evans.

“I was not prepared for the possibility that anyone might want to affect the outcome of this election so badly that they would resort to vicious efforts to smear me and my wife and to deliver a fatal blow to my political career,” Carper said.

“The implications in that story are without basis in fact.”

Two days later the campaign followed up with a statement from Diane Carper, in which she echoed what her husband had said. “Let me state unequivocally that I would never allow my children or myself to be abused. The very notion that anyone would imply such a thing for political gain or any other reason is appalling,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, Evans danced around the issue. In a statement of his own, he disassociated his campaign from it while taking shots at both The News Journal and Carper.

“In the past the Wilmington News Journal has felt that an individual’s personal conduct was fair game for political commentary. The New York Post has raised serious allegations about my opponent’s personal conduct — questions that cannot be swept away by falsely accusing my campaign, questions we did not raise but questions that must be answered now by Mr. Carper, his family, his neighbors and those who know him well,” Evans’ statement said.

Not very coincidentally, the Post’s story appeared at a time Evans’ poll numbers were heading south. How the voters would react to the mutual mud-slinging was something no one knew, but Carper’s campaign got a boost when The News Journal reported that the charges against him were planted by

Republican operatives working for Evans out of Washington after local Republicans had no luck pushing them here. Chief among them was Roger Stone, an up-and-coming strategist known for his affinity for political black arts.

As the story unfolded, Moyed in particular exposed the skulduggery in language more stinging than usual for newspapers, even for political columns.

"[There is a] difference, in terms of public morality, between a congressman climbing into bed with a blonde bimbo lobbyist and a father swatting his stepchildren and/or his wife," Moyed wrote.

"Republicans tried for weeks to peddle the dirt and finally denied responsibility when one newspaper bit. . . . The episode raised more serious questions about Evans' conduct, the conduct of his supporters and the conduct of his staff. 'I emphatically deny that my campaign or anyone associated with it has disseminated the widespread negative information about my opponent's personal life,' Evans said in a statement."

Moyed declared, "That's a damned lie."

The day Moyed's column ran, there was a telephone call at Carper's headquarters for Ed Freel, the campaign manager. The caller identified herself as Paula Parkinson and offered to help. Freel had no way of knowing who the caller really was, but it did not matter. The race was too soiled already. Freel hung up. Later he learned his caller indeed was Parkinson herself.

The New York Post's story blew up on Evans, not Carper. Its effect became clear to Carper days later as he walked down the Market Street Mall in Wilmington. A woman approached him and spoke too softly for him to hear. He asked her to repeat what she had said but once again could not make out her words. He asked yet again, and she said, "*Kick his ass.*"

Although public opinion swayed Carper's way, the incident was perhaps the lowest in his public life. He would not speak of the allegations, even when they were repackaged and resurfaced 14 years later while he was running for a second term as governor. In an interview in 1998 for this writing, however, he dealt with them straightforwardly.

"Did I slap my wife 20 years ago? Yes. Do I regret it? Yes. Would I do it again? No," Carper said.

The blessing of political campaigns, no matter how sordid, is that they have to end on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Election Day in 1982 mercifully came as early as it could — on Nov. 2.

Drained and exhausted, Carper and Freel met that morning for breakfast at Arner's restaurant on U.S. 13 near New Castle. They were not sure what would happen, but they were sure they had done what they could. "To use a basketball term, we had left everything on the court, and however it came out, we felt good about it," Freel said.

As matters turned out, they wound up feeling so good about it that Arner's came to represent a political lucky charm to them, and they have breakfasted there every Election Day that Carper has been on the ballot since. The luck has not run out yet.

The voting returns in Delaware that day mirrored what occurred nationally — largely a disaster for the Republicans with only an occasional bright spot. More often than not, elections in non-presidential years favor the party locked out of the White House, and with a recession gnawing at the voters, this one was guaranteed to be a setback for Ronald Reagan's Republicans. Already in the minority in the U.S. House, the party lost 26 seats there, but it salvaged something for itself by picking up a Senate seat to add to its slim majority in the upper chamber.

At home Gov. Pete du Pont, who was not on the ballot, did not expect to be affected by the election, but he was. Voters mowed through a crop of Republican legislators, leaving du Pont with a Democratic General Assembly for the final two years of his administration. The Democrats picked up an open seat in the Senate to increase their majority there by one to 13-8, and in an extraordinary flip-flop, they went from being in the House minority by 25-16 to being in the House majority by an identical 25-16 margin. The Democrats gathered in triumph at the Radisson Wilmington Hotel.

"We're back to running the state again," said state Rep. Orlando J. George Jr., a Wilmington Democrat who had more reason than anyone to celebrate. He was in line to become the House speaker. "The voters decided that the message they were going to send was going to come all the way down to the local levels."

Du Pont for his part surveyed the results stoically. "Funny things are happening in this election," he said. "We've worked with the Democrats before, and we will this time."

The outcome of the statewide races was equally glum for the Republicans. Of the five contests, the Democrats won three of them, and they did it by knocking off a trio of Republican incumbents. Evans was gone. Spruance, the Republican auditor, was defeated. So was Gebelein, the Republican attorney general who had pledged to serve only one term, or as the News Journal wittily put it, "Delaware voters held Attorney General Richard S. Gebelein to his promise."

Roth survived the Democratic onslaught, and Rzewnicki also bucked the trend to get herself elected treasurer, restoring to the Republicans the post Carper was vacating.

An unhappy Dave Levinson watched his fellow Democrats celebrate. Of all of them, he had been the one to run on a national theme, using his Senate campaign to tie Roth to the recession, but only he had failed in a statewide bid to unseat a Republican incumbent. Roth simply had been around too long for Levinson to overcome the voters' regard for him. It did not seem fair to Levinson, and he said so in a bitter concession speech.

"In a democracy we always leave a little something for the losers, and that something seems to be Sen. Roth," Levinson said.

There was a little-known footnote to the Senate race. While Levinson never made it to Capitol Hill, someone on his campaign staff did. His political consultant had imported from Indiana a 24-year-old Democratic operative named Maria Cantwell. She paid her dues, working on elections around the country,

until she finally settled down in Washington state. She got involved with politics there, made a fortune in a computer software company and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2000.

The election brought a sea change to the congressional delegation. At 35 years old, Carper was the state's first Democratic representative in 16 years, flipping the Delaware contingent from 2-1 Republican to 2-1 Democratic. Despite the painful loss for the Republicans and the ill will of the campaign, Evans nevertheless ended it graciously when he conceded.

"Our spirits are good, very good," Evans said. "I congratulate my young opponent and the Democratic Party for their victory today."

The election was over. In the quiet afterwards, it was Tom Carper who got the divorce.