

FROM KHARTOUM TO CONCORD

A STINT AS A POLITICIAN WAS NEVER PART OF MY VISION FOR LIFE AFTER THE
FOREIGN SERVICE — AND CERTAINLY NOT BEGINNING AT AGE 77.

BY DON PETTERSON

At 6:30 on a cold midwinter day, it's dark when I roust myself out of bed. By 7:45, I've showered, shaved, had breakfast, donned suit and tie, packed my briefcase, kissed Julie goodbye, and begun my 40-minute drive to the capital.

A Foreign Service member getting ready to commute to the State Department? No, a freshman member of New Hampshire's House of Representatives going to work in Concord.

A stint as a politician had never been a part of my imaginings about life after the Foreign Service — and certainly not beginning at age 77! Since coming to New Hampshire from Sudan in 1995, when I retired from the Foreign Service, and returning in 1999 after serving as chargé d'affaires in Monrovia for about a year, I've maintained a focus

on Sudan. I wrote a book about it; traveled to Khartoum and Nairobi in 1997 with another former American ambassador, the late Bill Kontos, to see if we could develop some ideas for ending Sudan's civil war. I also worked as a consultant for a Sudanese charitable organization, chaired an international commission in relation to the peace agreement that ended the civil war in 2005, and went to Juba in 2007 in connection with the commission's work.

State issues lay largely outside my range of interests. I said as much in the early fall of 2007 when, to my surprise, Democratic Party officials asked me to run for a vacant seat in the New Hampshire House of Representatives. "You've got the wrong guy," I replied. "There are others in Brentwood [my town] who know a lot more about New Hampshire than I do." And I gave them a couple of names. But after some friends urged me to run, I capitulated.

On the Campaign Trail

A day later, I had a call from Jim Webber, elected to fill a vacant House seat in nearby Seabrook several months earlier. I readily accepted his offer to give me some pointers, and we met at a nearby coffee shop. A few minutes into our conversation, I asked him to be my campaign manager, and he accepted. A man at a nearby table, Ed Cunningham, came over, plunked down a \$20 contribution, and offered to knock on doors for me (which he did, several hundred times). The campaign was off and running!

Don Petterson, a Foreign Service officer from 1960 to 1995, was ambassador to Somalia, Tanzania and Sudan, among 10 overseas postings, and also served as a deputy assistant secretary of State. He is the author of Inside Sudan: Political Islam, Conflict and Catastrophe (Westview Press, 1999) and Revolution in Zanzibar: A Cold War Tale (Westview, 2002). In 2005 he chaired the Abyei Boundaries Commission. He was elected to New Hampshire's House of Representatives in 2007.

A couple of days afterward, Jim and I drove 40 miles to Concord to talk to a state party official. The three of us walked to the secretary of state's office in the capitol building to file for the election. Asked to produce \$2 for the filing fee, I was chagrined to find nothing but a dead moth in my wallet and ended up borrowing the money from the party official. I signed a pledge to limit my campaign spending to 50 cents per registered voter for the upcoming primary (I was unopposed, but the Republicans had two candidates) and the same for the subsequent general election. This came to about \$2,400, more than I would spend. I was not going to tap special interests or Hollywood celebrities for hefty donations.

In addition to \$500 from Julie and me, an unexpected like amount from the New Hampshire Committee to Elect Democrats, and some financial help from the state party, I raised \$717.

Name recognition was very important because independents in the district outnumber Republicans, who outnumber Democrats. So my first outlay was \$395 for lawn signs, the local equivalent of TV ads. I assigned to myself the job of putting them up and, in the process, got much better acquainted with Brentwood's 17 square miles of rolling hills. I have to admit I felt a rush, albeit a mild and controlled one (as one would expect from a former FSO), from seeing the countryside dotted with signs — in red, white and blue, of course:

DON PETTERSON

**State Rep
Brentwood**

Using his computer, Jim produced hundreds of colored fliers featuring my smiling face with leafy green trees in the background, which went well with one of my campaign pledges: "Preserve the rural character of Brentwood." Other stated objectives included affordable and accessible health care, improved education opportunities for all New Hampshire children, and a "bipartisan approach in resolving tough issues" (often lacking in the state legislature).

The state party paid for the printing of three "Elect Don Petterson" postcards. That message was emblazoned on the front of the card, while the reverse was a paean to Governor John Lynch and the Democratic Party, with a subtext that I would work with them to "Help Continue to Deliver Results." One card had a picture of me with the governor. He had a practiced politician's wide smile, while I looked as if I suddenly realized my fly was open. My campaign fund paid for the postage, and party workers affixed address

labels to the cards and saw to their mailing.

Retail Politics

Perhaps the most important part of our campaigning was knocking on doors (Brentwood's 4,000 residents live in about 1,300 houses). I originally planned to cover every house myself, but it didn't take very long for me to realize how impractical that idea was. Fortunately, an energetic party official named Kari Thurman organized the canvassers, who included young volunteers from the Obama campaign.

All this extraordinary assistance for a candidate for the state legislature came about because of New Hampshire's presidential primary, which took place less than two months after Brentwood's Nov. 13, 2007, special election. The state was swarming with volunteers and staffers for the many presidential hopefuls. Some of them, as well as the two major parties, wanted to help determine the outcome of the Brentwood election, the only one in the state.

My opponent, the winner of the Republican primary, declared he wanted to go to Concord to protect the rights of gun owners and the sanctity of the home. In a letter, he charged

that I was "a career political Clinton appointee" and would "likely rubber stamp vote with the liberal and tax happy Democrats in charge in Concord." Responding, I wrote a letter to the area's newspaper pointing out that there was nothing political about any of my U.S. government appointments and explaining how I had become a career Foreign Service officer. And I declared: "I am not now, nor have I ever been, anybody's rubber stamp." Otherwise, the campaign was pretty tame stuff.

On Election Day, I showed up at the community center polling place shortly before it opened at 8 a.m. Following New Hampshire custom, a few of my supporters and I stood in near-freezing weather holding one of my signs until the voting ended at 7 p.m., leaving only for a lunch break.

By most standards the voter turnout of 664 that day might seem small, but Brentwood had never had that many people — 27 percent of registered voters — vote in an off-cycle special election. Once the voting closed, my opponent and I and our respective entourages traipsed into the warmth of the polling station, and about 20 minutes later the town clerk announced the result: 372 to 292 in my favor. "Now," I joked, "what do I do?" My erstwhile opponent did not seem amused.

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run for a vacant seat
in the state legislature,
I replied: "You've got
the wrong guy."*

A week later the governor swore me in. A couple of days later I was back in Concord to fill out various forms, including a medical history, and obtain ID badges, a parking permit and state representative license plates, along with a ton of reading material. At least no typhoid, yellow fever or other shots were required — not even one against exposure to bloviation.

On-the-Job Training

I had only a vague notion of what being a state representative would entail, but had heard that it was not a full-time job. After the legislative session began in January, I quickly learned that, to the contrary, I would have to put in many hours to do the job right. In my first week I spent 54 hours attending committee hearings and full sessions of the House, commuting to and from Concord, and responding to constituent requests.

As I learned the ropes, the hours I

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put in became fewer — about 40 during the last week of January, for example. And I enjoyed my new occupation. I got to know a lot of people representing a cross-section of New Hampshire residents; got an education about a wide variety of issues; and learned what it was like to be a part of the legislative process. And I got paid — a whopping \$100 a year.

I served on the Executive Offices and Administration Committee, which has responsibility for legislation affecting all the offices of the state's executive branch and commissions established by the governor. Three major issues the committee dealt with during my term were an overhaul of the state's retirement system, an audit of the medical board, and regulation of gambling enterprises.

Bills touching on foreign policy are rare in the legislature, but one did come before ED&A (as it is generally known). I found myself testifying before my own committee on a bill calling for the retirement system to divest itself of securities from any entity having business ties to — of all places — Sudan.

My years in the Foreign Service helped me in my political incarnation. To win office I had to put together a functioning organization and then convince voters that my ideas were sound. In the legislature I have to

analyze issues and put forward ideas or arguments on how to deal with them. And to pass a piece of legislation, I'll need to create a negotiating stance compelling enough to achieve broad-based support from different, sometimes opposed, elements in both the House and the Senate.

I was pleased to find that there was no partisanship in the committee's work (unlike on the floor of the House). Instead, there is a refreshing, good-humored, bipartisan collegiality. After I had listened to debates and voted on hundreds of bills, participated in dozens of committee hearings, and worked in conference committees, the 2007-2008 legislative biennium ended in June.

In the New Hampshire House, members can introduce new bills only in the first half of the biennium. Because I arrived on the scene in its second half, I had no opportunity to initiate any legislation. As the weeks passed, I began collecting in my mind statewide problems I believed needed to be addressed and could be remedied in part or in whole by new laws. My first six months in the House have taught me how to go about doing that. But first, I'll have to be re-elected.

It will be more difficult to run this time. I'll not have much help from the party, which will be immersed in work to elect Barack Obama. I'll be just one of about 400 Democratic candidates running for the House, so resources from the party and the Committee to Elect Democrats will be slim. I'll have to create my own fliers and other materials. And there won't be any Obama volunteers to give me a hand canvassing or carry signs at "visibility" opportunities.

Still, I've got a new campaign manager in mind (Jim will be running for his own re-election) and will gather friends together to give me a hand. And I've got most of my lawn signs resting in our garage, ready to be planted once again. ■

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