

# Computerized Opposition Research: The Instant Parry

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*The Republican opposition research effort for the '84 elections enabled their candidates to uncover Democratic vulnerabilities at the push of a button. Funded with \$1.1 million by the RNC, a research team spearheaded by the authors built an unprecedented computerized textual database of information culled from over 400,000 documents. The data could be accessed and analyzed instantly. And not only by the White House debate preparation team, but by Reagan-Bush operatives and candidates all over the country via a telecommunications network and through transportable floppy disks. Here you get a first-hand account of the enormous advantages provided by computerized campaign research in the media age. The real power of this Republican "secret weapon" could very well decide the big state and national races in '86 and '88.*

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Andy Warhol once said, "Art is anything you can get away with." During the 1984 primary campaign, former Vice President Walter F. Mondale appeared to have borrowed a page from the pop artist's book. In confrontations with his chief rival Gary Hart, Mondale got away with murder. A few examples:

- Mondale savaged Hart for voting against the 1979 Chrysler bail-out legislation. In Northeastern industrial towns, Mondale cited this vote as evidence of callousness toward the needs of working men and women. Hart took the bait and argued the merits of the bail-out bill. He thus drew additional attention to his anti-Chrysler vote, while winning few converts. By

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the time Hart aides discovered that Mondale had voted against a 1973 bill in the Senate to bail out the Lockheed corporation, the campaign debate had moved on to other issues.

- Mondale made health care policy a campaign issue when he charged that Hart had voted against a cost-containment bill and "with the hospital lobby." Hart, groping for an answer, countered with arcane comparisons of various health care proposals considered by Congress in the 1970s. He could have turned the discussion quickly to his advantage by citing Carter's HEW Secretary Joseph Califano, who wrote that Hart voted *with* the Carter-Mondale Administration on health care cost-containment legislation.
- In a tough fight for nuclear freeze voters, Mondale repeatedly challenged Hart's commitment to arms control. During a televised debate on the eve of the New York primary, Hart wilted under Mondale's attacks. The Colorado senator could do little more than glare at his opponent. It was clear that Mondale had studied his rival's record: The former vice president could cite Hart's votes and statements going back several years. It was just as clear that Gary Hart was not prepared to attack Walter Mondale's arms

→ a "concourse" on the opponent

record. The debate may have turned out differently if Mondale had been challenged to defend his support for the MX missile and the B-1 bomber as vice president and U.S. senator.

(What stopped Gary Hart in his march to the Democratic nomination? Fundamentally, Gary Hart's tragic flaw was that he knew nothing about Walter Mondale.) Hart may have been knowledgeable about New Industrial Policy, military reform, Individual Training Accounts and yuppies, but he possessed only a sketchy outline of Mondale's 20-year public record and had no base of information from which to predict the next move by "Fighting Fritz." Mondale understood his opponent's weaknesses and executed an effective strategy. He made Gary Hart the issue, confident that Hart lacked the resources to turn the debate around. Mondale hit hard, keeping the Colorado senator on the defensive until the nomination was in the bag.

It should come as no surprise that Republican strategists observed the Democratic primary process in excruciating detail. In Mondale's success was found the secret to his undoing. For the first time in his career, Walter Mondale would be forced to confront—and run against—his own record.

\* (Veteran Reagan speechwriter Ken Khachigian believes that campaigns are won and lost in the library.) This is the story of a computerized library that helped bring down the Democratic candidate for president in 1984.

### The core of the system

The Opposition Research Group was formed in February 1984. Funded with \$1.1 million from the Republican National Committee, the group's first task was to gather every possible piece of information on all eight Democratic candidates then running for president. The research staff amassed a staggering amount of material. Over 2,000 sources were tapped; in the end, more than 400,000 documents were collected.

(Is knowledge power? Only if it is comprehensive and accessible.) The magnitude of this collection effort would have broken any traditional opposition research organization; storing the documents would have required room after room of file drawers—with no guarantee that the information would ever be retrievable in a practical sense. Only the application of advanced computer technology could guarantee the results a national presidential campaign demanded: useful information that is instantly retrievable.

The system was built in stages during the first weeks of the campaign. (The first step was to develop procedures to review the thousands of documents that had been collected.) A staff of readers sifted through newspaper and magazine articles, *Congressional Record* speeches, campaign literature, broadcast transcripts and other public sources, to identify key passages. In order of priority, readers/coders looked for (1) direct quotes by the candidates; (2) quotes attributed to the candidates; and (3) quotes about the candidates by other individuals, ranging from Democratic leaders to Iowa farmers. Readers familiar with candidates and issues sifted the wheat from the chaff, selecting only the most important quotations. Quality control procedures reduced the risk that an important fact or quote would be overlooked. (Key excerpts culled from primary documents became the "data" used in this computerized research system.)

(The data were then entered into the Republican National Committee's mainframe computer according to a hierarchical, issue-oriented dictionary with a total of over 600 individual categories.) The process was evolutionary. As Democratic candidates dropped from the race, day-to-day collection and analysis of materials pertaining to that candidate were terminated and staff resources shifted to the remaining candidates. As our methods improved, resources became simultaneously focused on fewer candidates, thus ensuring that we would be at peak efficiency when only one man was left.

The system eventually grew to approximately 75,000 items, including 45,000 quotes documenting the complete career of Walter Mondale—easily the largest collection of opposition materials on a political candidate ever assembled. (The 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign based its research on approximately 6,000 items related to Jimmy Carter.) In gathering the materials, the objective was to assemble a database that was both current and comprehensive. The Mondale collection even included the law review article he had written while a student at the University of Minnesota in 1950. During the height of the campaign, the entire database was updated every 24 hours. (The major newspapers were analyzed each morning and data entered into the computer by noon the same day.)

The data were stored in a dictionary that anyone with 15 minutes of training could use to conduct basic or advanced research. The operator responded to a series of screen prompts for subject, candidate, source, data, etc. The implications of this system were ominous: When a candidate opened his mouth, it would take just a few seconds

to compare his statement with others made during the course of his career. A complete history of a candidate's statements on a specific issue could be reviewed in minutes. Charges could be researched and countered almost immediately. Opposition research resources, formerly used for next-day (or next-week) responses, could now be injected directly into minute-by-minute campaign trench warfare. A barrier in political research activities had been broken.

### Linking headquarters and the field

Traditional opposition research operations are usually handicapped by inaccessibility. In most campaigns, research is performed at headquarters, where the reference library and issue analysts are located. When the candidate or surrogate is on the road, access to opposition materials is limited to what can be read over a telephone or sent via a telecopier. And the standard research effort limits the campaign in other important respects as well.

Campaign headquarters staff generally generate their own research requests, typically on topics that are national in scope and of intense concern to combatants "inside the (Washington, D.C.) beltway." Field staff need research assistance, too; but they generally require information on topics of local interest, such as the candidate's record on black lung benefits or peanut price supports. Because research resources are limited and the research staff is physically located at headquarters, requests generated there inevitably take precedence over requests from the field. The situation can degenerate rapidly. As field staff research needs are passed over, frustrated state and local campaign workers cease asking headquarters for help; they attempt to perform their own research, producing material of uneven quality and fragmenting the campaign's message. Campaigners in the field ignore orders to send primary materials to headquarters for analysis. When materials do not flow from the field to headquarters, the campaign's central reference collection becomes increasingly irrelevant.

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The Opposition Research Group overcame this traditional obstacle by making its resources accessible to all elements of the campaign. An electronic communications system was developed to link 50 state party headquarters, 50 state campaign headquarters and spokesmen in all 208 ADIs (Areas of Dominant Influence—broadcast rating markets) with Opposition Research, the Republican National Committee and Reagan-Bush '84 headquarters. Party and campaign spokesmen had in-

stant access to up-to-the-minute talking points, issue papers and draft speeches for use in discussions with local media. The database itself was accessible to key campaign and party officials—even on board Air Force One and Air Force Two.

### Benchmark analysis

Once the database was made comprehensive, retrievable and accessible, a team of senior analysts was assembled. In addition to director Michael J. Bayer, the group included: Joseph Rodota, a former official at the Department of Education and former staff member of the Senate Republican Policy Committee; Susan Carleson, former legislative assistant to Rep. Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.) and former advisor to the President's Commission on Social Security Reform; Susan Hopkins, a former speechwriter for Housing and Urban Development Secretary Samuel Pierce; Candace L. Strother, a former White House staffer in the Office of Public Liaison; and Don Todd, former executive director of the American Conservative Union and director of Idaho's 1980 "Anybody But Church" committee. With the assistance of a 24-member research and computer support staff, these analysts went to work building the case against Walter Mondale. ✓

(The first step was a crash program to generate a series of benchmark issue papers on virtually every salient public policy issue, from abortion and welfare to the space program and the Soviet arms buildup.) The computerized database made otherwise daunting research projects manageable. A complete analysis of Mondale's record on defense procurement, for example, could be performed in less than two days by reviewing the contents of a dozen or so computer files. An analyst in a traditional opposition research operation would need at least a week for a similar project, with no assurances that the research was comprehensive. Within six weeks, five analysts at Opposition Research ✓ produced over 1,000 pages of benchmark analysis on Walter Mondale (as well as dozens of papers on Gary Hart who, at that time, was still within striking distance of the nomination and thus was a possible vice presidential nominee). Benchmark issue papers, typically five to 30 pages in length, discussed key aspects of the candidate's record, including outrageous statements, shifting positions, contradictions, vulnerabilities and strengths. These papers formed the primary resource from which were developed most Reagan-Bush '84 and G.O.P. attacks on the Mondale/Democratic record.

## A quantum leap in research capabilities

Once benchmark analysis was completed, the Opposition Research team tackled a wide array of campaign assignments. A review of key projects illustrates the versatility of this computer-based research system:

- **Quick set-up.** Traditional opposition research operations take several weeks or months to develop reference collections on candidates. Until 1984, this was sufficient for presidential campaigns; "dark horse" presidential candidates were a rarity and the vice-presidential picks were almost never of sufficient interest to warrant an immediate, full-scale research effort. Walter Mondale, however, interviewed "nontraditional" candidates—minorities and women—for the second spot on his ticket. This heightened public attention to the selection process and required careful planning in the Republican camp. (As Mondale interviewed Democrats in his North Oaks, Minnesota home, Opposition Research developed a series of plans to assemble complete databases on each of Mondale's possible choices.) Less than 10 days after Mondale selected Geraldine Ferraro, Opposition Research had collected some 25,000 source materials and entered into its computer approximately 5,000 key statements documenting the public career of the congresswoman from Queens. Using this database, benchmark analysis of the Ferraro record was completed in less than three weeks.
- **Overnight analysis.** During the Democratic National Convention, key addresses by Mondale, Ferraro, Edward M. Kennedy, Gary Hart, Mario Cuomo and Tip O'Neill were analyzed overnight by the Republican team. When Hart half-heartedly praised Mondale as a "tough competitor," a search of the computer revealed that Mondale had referred to the Colorado senator as a "cold-hearted wretch" and implied that Hart had entered politics to get away from his family. When Ted Kennedy lauded Mondale in his introduction, a few commands to the computer quickly generated a print-out listing every barb the two pols had traded since the bitter 1980 campaign. Without the aid of a computer, such detailed research and analysis would have been virtually impossible to carry out in the time allowed.
- **Publications.** As the general election campaign began, the Opposition Research Group produced Vice President Malaise, a 200-page book published by the Republican National Committee in August 1984. This volume, the official

1984 Republican analysis of the Mondale record, was a valuable reference tool used by Reagan-Bush '84 and Republican party officials throughout the country. Another example of the Republican's application of computer technology to political research: Vice President Malaise was available on floppy disks compatible with most small wordprocessors and personal computers.

- **Pinpoint accuracy.** What did our opponent say the last time he visited St. Mary's, Ohio? This question would have stumped a traditional research system, but the Opposition Research Group's database enabled users to retrieve statements and quotes by geographic location. This added a new element to candidate and surrogate scheduling. Campaign planners could know instantly the issues their opponents were stressing (or avoiding) in a given locale. Voters could be reminded of statements the Democrat candidate had made in their city one month—or 20 years—earlier.
- **Party building.** The Opposition Research Group had an extensive list of "clients" in addition to Reagan-Bush '84 and the Republican National Committee. Senator Jesse Helms, for example, tapped the Group for assistance in his race against North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt, whom he tagged "a Mondale liberal." (Assistance was provided to virtually every Republican candidate interested in running against the Mondale-Ferraro ticket.)

## Preparing for the debates

The Opposition Research Group's greatest test during the campaign was the presidential and vice presidential debates. (The computer-based research system was essential in projecting opponents' charges and responses; enhancing the simulation effects of debate practice sessions; spotting weaknesses and developing attack themes; and generating post-debate analysis.)

In August, well before negotiations over debate format had begun, the Opposition Research Group prepared for the White House debate preparation team a 200-page briefing book that projected Mondale attack themes and responses to a range of questions. This book containing hundreds of Mondale's actual statements was used extensively by Office of Management and Budget Director David Stockman to prepare for his role as "Mondale" in President Reagan's practice debates. Excerpts of these materials were inserted directly into the president's debate briefing books.

What subjects would Mondale be most likely to emphasize during the debates? What would he avoid? Candidates are creatures of habit. Mondale and Ferraro (and, for that matter, President Reagan and Vice President Bush) could be expected to dwell on issues and themes with which they felt most comfortable. The Opposition Research Group generated weekly break-downs of the volume of candidate statements entered into the database, by subject. A review of the six-week period preceding the debates revealed, for example, that Mondale had not addressed the defense of Europe or our strategic relationship with Japan. Analysis of Mondale's shifts in emphasis helped White House debate strategists to use their resources and the president's time more efficiently by focusing on issues Mondale himself pressed leading up to the debates.

Opposition Research provided materials and analysis, including detailed scenarios of Democratic tactics and strategy, during preparations for both presidential debates. On several occasions, various members of the president's debate preparation team called Opposition Research analysts while a session was in progress, asking about Mondale's *exact phrasing* of a particular charge. The analyst would search the database and find the answer within seconds—with the caller still on the line.

The Opposition Research Group and its computer system played a similar role in preparing Vice President Bush for his debate with Geraldine Ferraro. In less than a week, the group prepared a comprehensive briefing book that projected Ferraro's likely attack themes and suggested possible responses. Opposition Research analysts prepared Rep. Lynn Martin (R-Ill.) for her role as the Ferraro stand-in; the team also attended and participated in the vice president's mock debate sessions. Nearly all of the arguments and themes Ms. Ferraro used in the actual debate were expected by the vice president from his preparations.

For six months, the Opposition Research Group also met to review videotapes of Mondale, Hart, Ferraro and other Democrats. This duty led to videotape studies of both Mondale and Ferraro. These tapes, depicting the candidates' behavior in a variety of debate situations, were also studied by the president and the vice president prior to each of the televised debates.

Following all three debates, the Opposition Re-

search Group worked through the night preparing detailed analyses, and complete transcripts. Comparisons of the candidates' debate statements with their record were performed quickly with the aid of the computer. In the first debate, for example, Walter Mondale stated that he supported the eventual repeal of tax indexing. Mondale campaign aides quickly issued a retraction, claiming that Mondale favored partial repeal of indexing in the near term, followed by a return to full indexing as the budget came into balance. The computer file of Mondale's statements on tax indexing told a different story. As far back as 1981, Mondale had consistently advocated the total repeal of income tax indexing. By October, the Opposition Research Group analysts were so familiar with the Mondale-Ferraro record that a thorough review and analysis of the debates could be completed in several hours. Research Group memoranda were of considerable value to White House, campaign, and Republican party "spin teams" at the debate sites; these spokesmen and strategists received the texts early in the morning after each debate—via electronic mail from Washington.

### Secret weapon?

Post-election news reports identified the Opposition Research Group and its computer system as the Republican "secret weapon" in 1984. The label, if it applies to the operation at all, would perhaps be a better description of the role computerized opposition research will play in 1986 and 1988.

Although the Mondale-Ferraro ticket pulled ahead of President Reagan and Vice President Bush in some polls after the Democratic convention, the Reagan-Bush lead remained healthy throughout the campaign. As a result, the two rival camps never engaged in the minute-by-minute "trench warfare" for which the Republican system was specifically designed.

Closer races lie ahead: 22 Republican senators elected in the first Reagan sweep are up again in 1986; the Republican presidential candidate in 1988 may not enjoy the benefits of incumbency—or Walter Mondale to run against.

In 1984, advanced computer technology was successfully applied to opposition research for the first time. When tomorrow's close races are fought, the technology developed this year could well give Republicans the winning edge. ★