

Political strategist plays a bigger hand

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By C. Fraser Smith
Sun Staff Writer

The campaign sign — lawn or window, bus or billboard — is the signature of Larry Steve Gibson's on-rushing career in Maryland politics.

He uses polling, television advertising and computers, to be sure, but the carefully conceived and widely distributed placard gives his campaigns the highly visible and personal touch the political strategist finds essential.

"I've gotten the reputation of being a sign and poster nut. I am. I prefer to see them on private property. It's not just advertising. It's the homeowner saying to his or her neighbors, 'I'm for this person.' So we do this as much as we can."

And this year, the 52-year-old Baltimore Democrat, lawyer, law

“I think what he's trying to do is pull off the hat trick: Prince George's executive, governor and mayor of Baltimore.”

AMERICAN JOE MIEDUSIEWSKI
Candidate for governor

professor, gardener, world traveler and scuba diver is extending his power beyond the city as he works to elect a governor and a new Prince George's County executive.

When Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke endorsed the current executive, Paris N. Glendening, for governor, Mr. Gibson's talents were put at Mr. Glendening's disposal. When the endorsement was made at City Hall, Mr. Gibson was there to unfurl the campaign banner. At his home on

Lambeth Road, he is even now refining his version of a Baltimore for Glendening sign. Look for it in a window near you.

"Larry likes to have power gravitate towards him," says state Sen. American Joe Miedusiewski, a Democratic candidate for governor from Baltimore. "I think what he's trying to do is pull off the hat trick: Prince George's executive, governor and mayor of Baltimore. If he wins, people will say, 'What a genius!' If he

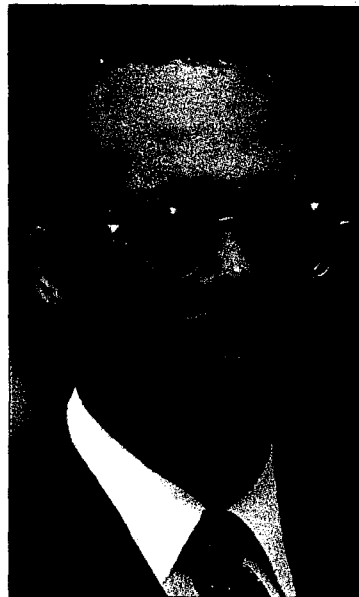
doesn't, he can say, 'Hey, I had three balls in the air.'"

Though his string of victories reaches back to the late 1960s, Mr. Gibson's cache resides primarily in his work over the past 12 years for Mr. Schmoke, who is expected to seek re-election next year.

In Baltimore, Mr. Gibson has relied on something political professionals call visibility. In 1972, he gained a memorable victory for Sen. George S. McGovern's weak presidential bid by hiring 40 school buses, 40 sound and light systems and 40 bullhorns to get out the vote.

In 1984, he put on such a display of lawn signs advertising a mid-term fund-raiser for Mr. Schmoke, who was then Baltimore state's attorney, that the City Council passed an ordi-

See **GIBSON**, 5A



GARO LACHINIAN/SUN STAFF PHOTO

Larry Gibson is a Schmoke adviser.

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GIBSON: Schmoke's top campaign strategist extends his influence statewide

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nance limiting the use of such signs to the campaign season.

In the 1992 presidential election, Mr. Gibson's voter registration efforts in Baltimore and his insistence on a distinctly Maryland campaign button helped Bill Clinton win more than 50 percent of the vote here, the second-best showing in the nation behind only Arkansas, Mr. Clinton's home state.

"He's a great rah-rah, pull-the-troops-together guy," says Del. Maggie McIntosh of Baltimore. "He has great personal loyalties. People will sit and churn out work for him."

This summer, he will scoot down the expressway two or three times a week to work as senior adviser in lawyer Wayne Curry's campaign to succeed Mr. Glendening as county executive in Prince George's. Mr. Curry and his campaign manager, Greg Wells, were students of Mr. Gibson's at the University of Maryland law school.

They wanted his experience — and the reflected glamour of Mr. Schmoke, who is very popular in the county.

'Smoke and mirrors'

While some speak of Mr. Gibson as a man driven to translate black voting potential into black political power, he says "vision" is too fancy a word for what motivates him. He is drawn to politics by his desire to see talented people in office, by friendship and by the attraction that usually exists between human beings and things they do well.

"He's the epitome of smoke and mirrors in politics," says one of his allies, who asks not to be quoted by name. While Mr. Gibson was only one of the players in the Clinton victory, this person says he has taken much of the credit.

Detractors say he twice turned what should have been certain victory into near defeat. In the 1987 and 1991 mayoral races, Mr. Schmoke's victory over former Mayor Clarence H. Du Burns was narrower than critics thought it should have been.

Mr. Burns, though, had his strengths: affability, long service and the backing of Gov. William Donald Schaefer's machine.

In 1968, Mr. Gibson managed Parren J. Mitchell's unsuccessful first race for Congress, then helped him win by 38 votes in 1970. His candidate for state's attorney of Bal-

timore, Milton B. Allen, was elected in 1970 but defeated in a bid for re-election four years later. Mr. Gibson was also co-director of former Attorney General Stephen H. Sachs' losing campaign for governor in 1986.

"You do the right thing," Mr. Gibson says. "When you have exceptional people, you try to support them. That's what I've tried to do here in Baltimore. If Wayne loses, it's a loss. But it won't be the first."

An important election

His venture into the Prince George's campaign is resented by some, welcomed by others.

"Prince Georgians are thrilled that he and Mayor Schmoke take an interest. Mayor Schmoke is very popular here," says Len Lucchi, a lawyer and campaign consultant who is working in the Curry camp.

When Mr. Gibson was quoted in a newspaper saying Mr. Curry's campaign had importance for black voters across Maryland, the suggestion that Mr. Gibson's campaigns are based solely on race arose again.

Mr. Gibson wonders why anyone would find his comment objectionable. "I didn't say the campaign was important only to blacks. In a progressive sense, though, it is important to blacks. I think it's also important to the firemen, to the police, to schoolchildren, to Hispanics."

He says a reporter asked him if Mr. Curry, who is black, would direct his efforts mainly at black voters. He replied by observing that Mr. Curry had worked in a predominantly white law firm, served as head of the county Chamber of Commerce and chairman of the United Way. He campaigns with large contingents of white volunteers and enjoys the support of several white County Council members and two well-integrated labor unions.

Still, some are unhappy with what they regard as an intrusion.

"I think it's incredible that Mr. Curry would allow his campaign to be run by someone from Baltimore," says Shirley P. Hill, who supports one of Mr. Curry's opponents, County Councilwoman Sue V. Mills.

Tough-minded

In Baltimore, Mr. Gibson's image has evolved from master organizer and strategist to what the columnists have referred to as string puller, puppeteer and boss, a man who controls patronage and the appoint-



SUN STAFF PHOTO/1992

Then a presidential candidate, Bill Clinton visits the home of Larry Gibson for a \$1,000-per-person fund-raiser.

ment of important Schmoke administration officials from police commissioner to finance director.

Mr. Gibson insists he has had next to nothing to do with these appointments and did not even meet the new police commissioner for weeks after he'd arrived.

Tough-minded and occasionally contrary, he seems as strong-willed as his protegee, Mr. Schmoke, seems contemplative and agreeable.

"Larry is all politics, no smooth; Kurt is all smooth, no politics," says a former Gibson campaign associate.

Mr. Gibson said he is mystified by the suggestion that his approach to politics does not go far beyond race.

"Maybe it's what comes along with being on the side of change," he says. He is the Baltimore leader who took over from the old, largely white

bosses who owned the citywide offices and delivered big Democratic majorities for statewide candidates.

Baltimore Councilman Martin O'Malley says some people may be offended by Mr. Gibson's frank assertion that his candidates' political strength lies heavily with black city voters. What is the difference, Mr. O'Malley wonders, between this belief and the calculations of Irish or Jewish or Italian political figures of earlier days?

A player

Mr. Gibson's feisty image owes much to his role in Baltimore as a lawyer for the late Roland N. Patterson, the superintendent of schools who fought vocally with the school board and then-Mayor Schaefer in the 1960s.

His angry image deepened, too, when he admitted an early antipathy to Baltimore, a city he thought would never shed its cloak of segregation. He had promised himself not to return after college but found his views tempered when he got a look at Washington and New York City.

His objective has been clear. When his candidate, Joseph C. Howard, won a seat on the Supreme Bench, the forerunner of Circuit Court, in 1968, Mr. Gibson said, "Here, for the first time, blacks became a significant political force city-wide."

To some, these observations made him seem confrontational.

"In the context of the times, Larry was very conservative. He wanted to register voters and win elections," says Michael Millemann, also a professor at the University of Maryland Law School. "He believed in the wonderful idea of empowering the minority community. But there is nothing radical in what he does."

"Larry speaks directly to whites and blacks," he says. "He does not carry race as a chip on his shoulder. He had a vision as a young civil rights activist that when that movement had come and gone voting would empower black people. It's a very simple vision: If you vote, you're a player. If you don't you're not."

Seasons

Mr. Gibson says he spends little time worrying about criticism. Politics is only one aspect of his life.

At the University of Maryland, he teaches trial practice, evidence and civil procedure. He practices law with Ronald N. Shapiro, his best friend since they were young clerks for U.S. District Judge Frank A. Kaufmann in 1967.

With his wife, Diana, and his son, Steve, a student at the University of Virginia, Mr. Gibson has become proficient at scuba diving, perfecting his technique around Caribbean islands from St. Lucia to Bonaire.

His resume includes the names of 43 countries he has visited. A methodical man, he keeps volumes of information on many of these destinations on his bookshelves.

The park-like grounds of his house in Guilford include many flower beds, a serene Zen garden and outdoor hot tub housed in an enclosure of Japanese motif.

Politics, he says, can be like gardens, marked by seasonal changes, definite beginnings and endings.

"They are not interminable," he says, glancing out the window of his study at beds of impatiens. The careful planner says green plants in the middle are about to produce blossoms that will pick up and unite the pink and white blossoms already visible at either end.

With Mr. Gibson, the seasons are almost always political. He operates as if political capital, uninvested, will be devalued. Flexing the organizational muscle as he will do on behalf of Mr. Glendening in Baltimore this year is the important thing. After all, Mr. Schmoke next year will face Council President Mary Pat Clarke, who is regarded as formidable.

'Georgia on my Mind'

Born in Washington, Mr. Gibson grew up in Baltimore. His father was a janitor, his mother, a cook. When he was a child, his family moved often, rarely staying in one place more than 18 months. His first goal when he became a lawyer was to buy a house for his parents.

He graduated from City College and went on to Howard University. He became president of the student body, participated in sit-ins and headed the District of Columbia Students for Civil Rights. When southern senators held up the 1964 Voting Rights Act in Congress, he and other students staged a counter demonstration near the Washington Monument. A framed thank-you letter from President Lyndon B. Johnson hangs on a wall in his law office.

His career-long devotion to campaign signs began the hard way when, as a freshman at Howard University, he tried to elect Georgia Pearson homecoming queen.

His efforts, he said, almost led to his dismissal.

With a stencil and a spray can, he endeavored to plaster the campus with Ms. Pearson's campaign slogan: "Georgia on my Mind." The dean was not happy about the paint. To make matters worse, students had someone else's name on their minds and Ms. Pearson ran second.

One of Mr. Gibson's signs, painted on a traffic directing device, remained legible for a full 10 years.

Whenever he returned to campus, Mr. Gibson noticed it and says he thought not of an election lost but of Georgia's lovely green eyes.

The next year, with signs more acceptable to the administration and a candidate more pleasing to the voters, he was victorious.