

What happened to Bill Bradley? The rise and fall of a US presidential candidate

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The collapse in early March of the presidential campaign of former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley illustrates a number of significant features of US politics.

Last fall the media lavished considerable attention on Bradley's challenge to Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic nomination, portraying Bradley as a man who articulated a new vision for the country. Opinion polls pointed to a Bradley win in New Hampshire, the state holding the first presidential primary.

By February, however, the Bradley campaign was faltering badly. In March, after an unbroken string of primary defeats, he withdrew from the contest.

How could Bradley's presidential bid, once highly touted, evaporate ignominiously in the course of only a few weeks? In the wake of Bradley's withdrawal, media commentators advanced a number of banal explanations. A *New York Times* article, for example, suggested that a turning point was Bradley's failure to embrace a former teacher who came to greet him on the platform during a campaign rally.

That presidential campaigns blossom and fizzle so abruptly, however, is indicative of something that has broader significance than the personality quirks of one or another candidate. It is a reflection of the decline of any genuine base of mass support for the two big business parties, and all of their aspiring candidates.

Under conditions of widespread apathy, if not outright hostility, on the part of wide layers of the populace, money, media coverage and celebrity play an inordinate role in determining the viability of a campaign. This has been seen in the primary campaigns in both parties—for example, the rise and rapid fall of the presidential bid of Republican Elizabeth Dole. The experience of the Bradley campaign is significant for the stark way in which it illustrates this general

phenomenon.

The perceived strength of Bradley's challenge did not lie in substantive policy differences with Gore. Both the former New Jersey Senator and the Vice President are big business politicians of a distinctly conservative mold. For all the talk of Bradley's "exciting new policies," he had been a staunch supporter of the Clinton-Gore administration, backing such reactionary policies as the sanctions against Iraq and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which stripped death row inmates of many of their rights. Bradley made a pointed decision not to make an issue of the one major policy question where he did oppose Clinton: welfare reform.

Bradley chose as his centerpiece social issue a proposal on health care which fell far short of providing universal coverage and was considerably less ambitious than the Clinton health care plan which failed to win support from either party in 1994. The plan would have eliminated Medicaid and instead give low-income families a government subsidy to buy health insurance through the federal employees' Health Benefit Program. However the proposed annual subsidy of a maximum of \$1,800 per adult and \$1,200 per child was less than required to buy even a minimal health insurance policy in many states.

When Gore attacked this plan as too generous and expensive—while at the same time demagogically criticizing it as a threat to Medicaid—Bradley made no effective reply. This was not merely a personal failing, but demonstrated that no section of the Democratic Party is capable of advancing an alternative, even of the most timid reformist character, to the right-wing social policies demanded by big business.

Bradley's initial success hinged on two decisive factors in US politics: access to substantial corporate

financial backing and name recognition. Bradley achieved celebrity during his 10-year career with the New York Knicks professional basketball team. This served as the springboard for his entry into politics. In 1978, shortly after retiring from basketball, he ran and was elected to the Senate from New Jersey.

Among Bradley's biggest campaign donors were firms that have profited the most from the stock market boom—Wall Street brokerage and investment houses and banks. Contributors included Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley, Dean Witter & Co. Goldman Sachs reportedly gave Bradley \$209,000 in so-called “bundled contributions,” designed to side-step campaign donation limits. Hi-tech firms also gave large amounts.

Nothing in Bradley's personal or political biography hinted at the slightest independence from big business. He grew up in the town of Crystal City Missouri, the son of a banker. He became a Rhodes scholar and attended Princeton University, where he starred on the college basketball team. He joined the Air Force reserve in 1967 rather than face the Vietnam War draft.

During his years in the Senate Bradley backed many of the policies of the Reagan administration: he supported aid to the anticommunist insurgents in Afghanistan and initially endorsed the war by the CIA-backed “contras” against Nicaragua.

In his book *Time Present, Time Past*, published in 1996, Bradley cited his efforts to build support for the 1986 Reagan tax cut bill as one of his proudest achievements. The measure slashed the top tax rate for wealthy individuals from 50 percent to 28 percent.

Bradley retired from the Senate in 1996, with his eye toward a presidential run. To this end he embarked on the lecture circuit, collecting \$2.7 million in speaking fees from corporate sponsors, an average of \$30,000 per appearance. In addition, he received \$500,000 in consulting fees, including \$300,000 from the financial conglomerate J.P. Morgan. Chase Manhattan chief executive Thomas G. Labrecque was listed as a member of the advisory board of the Bradley for President campaign.

Bradley's ability to raise millions of dollars established his viability as a contender in the eyes of the news media, which began to report favorably on his candidacy. Polls showed him closing in on Gore in a number of key states.

His demise coincided with the shift in media coverage to the campaign of Senator John McCain following his defeat of George W. Bush in the New Hampshire primary. Even though Bradley had come close to defeating Gore in New Hampshire, his campaign was thrust into the background on the eve of a series of decisive primary elections. Insofar as Bradley did receive coverage, the media tended to portray his campaign as inept and confused. Soon speculation was rife about an early Bradley withdrawal. By March 7, the date of the so-called Super Tuesday primary, it was all over for the ex-Senator.



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