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Watch Closely and Pay Attention

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Stuart Rothenberg’s big break came while he was wearing pajamas.

It was early on a Friday morning in 1990 and Washington had been paralyzed by several inches of snow. Rothenberg ’70, who publishes a political newsletter, was on the floor at home playing with his kids when the telephone rang. It was a staff member from the office of John McGlaughlin, the host of The McGlaughlin Group and another show of political analysts, One on One. The man asked Rothenberg how long he would need to get down to the studio to tape a segment of One on One.

“Apparently the guy they planned to have on the show was held up at the airport and couldn’t make it in,” Rothenberg recalled. “I hung up the phone and rushed into my bedroom to get dressed. I was in such a hurry, I put my foot right through my trousers and had to switch to a different suit.”

On the way to the studio, says Rothenberg, he prepped himself mentally for the interview. “I was thinking, ‘just react, have an opinion, don’t leave dead air. I didn’t have time to be nervous.’

These days major network news shows call regularly asking him to appear, and he hasn’t ruined a pair of trousers in a long time. He has been on Meet the Press and Today and CNN’s Inside Politics; he’s a favorite source on NPR’s Morning Edition; his election forecasts have appeared in every major newspaper in the country; that was Rothenberg sitting alongside Bruce Morton and Frank Sesno in the CNN studios during live coverage of the mid-term elections on November 3. “Articulate,” “authoritative,” “plugged in” is how network executives and political insiders describe Rothenberg, who, at 50, has become something of a star. He is an overnight success 20 years in the making.

Prior to his being “discovered” on One on One, Rothenberg had been toiling in obscurity, grinding out his Rothenberg Political Report from a small, disheveled Capitol Hill office a short walk from Washington’s Union Station. His job, essentially one that he invented, is to inform the Washington establishment about which Congressional candidates are likely to win and which are likely to lose. It is information that helps fuel the election cycle engine, and clearly, people want it.

The Rothenberg Political Report, a compilation of statistics, projections and analysis that boils down dozens of political races into an eight- to 10-page newsletter, has only a few hundred subscribers. But the number of readers is less important than who those readers are—political reporters, party operatives and interest group representatives looking for an edge. With the Report to guide them, the press can determine who is worth coverage and who isn’t; political action committees can identify candidates worthy of funding support; special interest groups know where and with whom to devote their energies. In a town full of powerful people, Rothenberg establishes who is hot and who is not.

Not that he would admit it. Rothenberg is spectacularly unimpressed with his own achievements and influence. “Who has ever heard of me? Nobody,” he said. “Outside of Washington and a few political junkies, people are much too busy to sit around watching me on C-SPAN at eight o’clock in the morning.”
"Getting good marks from Rothenberg means your campaign is moving in the right direction. If he says something positive about your candidacy, people in Washington listen. He is the gatekeeper for the Washington community in terms of how they view races."

His reputation for fairness and scrupulous honesty endow Rothenberg's analysis with credibility that no amount of public relations spin can match—or overcome. "He comes from Republican politics, but I think Democrats have as high a regard for his analysis as anybody," Sallick said.

In a city unaccustomed to hearing the plain truth, where officials are conditioned to sanitize every statement, Rothenberg is refreshingly frank. And he isn't afraid of a declarative statement. "The presidential race is over," Rothenberg pronounced in a column in 1996, eight weeks before election day. He wasn't attempting to sway voter opinion or to influence the election's outcome, he says, he was "merely stating the obvious." "I find the idea that I'm that influential ridiculous," he said. "I was just saying what everybody knew but for whatever reason didn't want to say."

Although Rothenberg is circumspect about the importance of his role, his power is undeniable. Last spring he interviewed a young, inexperienced Democratic congressional candidate from the state of Washington, Laura Ruderman. She had potential, he thought, but wasn't
ready for prime time. He wrote—politely but pointedly—that she should consider running for a local or state office before attempting to land a spot in the U.S. House of Representatives. Two days after his column appeared, Ruderman dropped out of the House race and announced she was running for state legislature.

Call it The Rothenberg Effect. "It doesn't always help our candidates, but he's usually right," Sallick said.

Rothenberg expected to be a teacher when he left Colby for the University of Connecticut, where he earned a Ph.D. in 1976. He was hired as a sabbatical replacement to teach government at Bucknell University, but the market for academics was oversaturated, says Rothenberg, whose wife, Elaine Rusinko, teaches Russian at the college level. He recognized that his teaching career would be stunted by lack of opportunity, he says, so he sent around resumes and was hired by an obscure conservative think tank, the Free Congress Foundation. He edited the foundation's political newsletter until 1989, when he purchased the newsletter and went off on his own. In the early '90s he began writing a column for Roll Call, the Capitol Hill newspaper.

Although he had a small following and was known within the Washington community, he says, television exposure gave him the visibility and cachet to expand his career into other media. It didn't hurt that his emergence as an expert coincided with the proliferation of 24-hour news programming, led by CNN. Punditry became a cottage industry.

CNN hired Rothenberg in the early '90s and in 1998 signed him to an exclusive contract that called for 26 appearances during the year. "Stu wasn't hired because he's a blow-dried TV type," said CNN political director Tom Hannon. "He is knowledgeable, articulate and authoritative."

During an election cycle, Rothenberg may be called upon several times a week to provide analysis for radio and television.

At a recent taping of a segment for CNN's News Source, Rothenberg sat comfortably on a swivel chair while the producer lobbed questions off camera. "Give me an interesting race from each time zone," the producer said. And with no more direction than that, Rothenberg took off on a three-minute monologue complete with colorful analogies and anecdotes about the candidates, their chances for victory and implications for their party. He did so not with the stern countenance of some other commentators but with an expression that suggested mischief. His mouth always seemed one small twist from a grin and his eyes danced as he searched for the best, most playful characterization of a particular race. The New York senate race between Charles Schumer and Alfonse D'Amato, one of the nastiest of the campaign, Rothenberg described as "kind of like a WWF mud wrestling match." A few days after the CNN tap-
on Nightline gives me the credentials to expand my audience," he said, "but that analysis isn't nearly as good as what I can give in a column I've written. Writing is more thoughtful. It's hard to get nuance on the air."

He deflects any attempt to characterize his media presence as glamorous. "I just try not to squeak," he said, laughing, referring to his wife's admonition that he not get too worked up on the air. "My voice tends to rise when I get excited."

"I was never a particularly outgoing person in high school or college. I'm not the guy people would have said will be on television someday. In most settings I still tend to blend into the woodwork, but when the light goes on on the television camera or for a speech, I know what I have to do," he said.

He is a political analyst, not a pundit, Rothenberg will tell you. "I draw a distinction between what I do and what the point-of-view spin doctors do," he said. "What you have in this town are many people who want to push their agenda. I want to tell the truth without the b.s."

Although his commentary may be and politicians, particularly those who might charitably be described as blowhards. "I can be sarcastic," he said. Then, after a pause, "It probably isn't my best feature."

He's no different now from when he was in college, says Colby friend Ken Viens '73, who calls Rothenberg "a no b.s. kind of guy." Viens recalls that Rothenberg always had an ability to "cut to the heart of the matter" during a discussion. "He wasn't afraid to have an opinion," he said.

"You knew where Stuey stood in a heartbeat," Viens said. "He could capture the essence of what somebody else said in about ten words."

As likely to be found at Big John's, a popular college hangout in the '60s and early '70s, as in the library, Rothenberg was a committed student without being overly earnest, says Viens. "He was a role model for me in some respects," Viens said. "He was a guy who could get a lot done and still have time to play cards or kibbitz with his friends."

Rothenberg has taken that regular guy personality with him into his professional life. "I have to talk to him just about every day. If he didn't have the sense of humor and a certain humility, my job would be a lot tougher," said Sallick of the DCCC. "When I look back on these last two years, working with Stu was one of the bright spots," he said.

These days, in addition to the regular gigs on TV—"my kids are totally bored with it now," Rothenberg said—he also gives dozens of speeches each year. He enjoys it but admits that the travel can be a drag on his family life. "This week," he said, looking at a desk calendar, "I fly to Phoenix for a breakfast speech on Thursday, then back home for my son's play that night, then I fly to Atlanta the next day to do the CNN stuff. It can be pretty hectic."

And just when you think he's going to get serious, the phone rings and he's bantering with a freelance journalist in Minnesota who has information on the amazing campaign of Jesse "The Body" Ventura. Ventura, who is running for governor, is eating into the leads (and will eventually defeat) two traditional candidates; that is to say, candidates who are not head-shaven, 300-pound former professional wrestlers who want to legalize prostitution. "Have the people of Minnesota gone mad?" Rothenberg says into the phone. He is grinning from ear to ear.

Rothenberg's nationwide network of contacts gives him access to up-to-the-minute information about candidates.