

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

OpenSIUC

---

The Simon Review (Occasional Papers of the  
Paul Simon Public Policy Institute)

Paul Simon Public Policy Institute

---

11-27-2023

## IDEAS WEREN'T ENOUGH: THE STRATEGIES BEHIND PAUL SIMON'S RUN FOR PRESIDENT, 1987-88

Robert Hartley

Follow this and additional works at: [https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ppi\\_papers](https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ppi_papers)

The Simon Review #67

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Simon Review (Occasional Papers of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute) by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

**THE SIMON REVIEW  
PAPER #67**

**IDEAS WEREN'T ENOUGH:  
THE STRATEGIES BEHIND PAUL SIMON'S  
RUN FOR PRESIDENT, 1987-88**

ROBERT HARTLEY

NOVEMBER, 2023

---



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
**PAUL SIMON  
PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE**

## **Ideas Weren't Enough: The Strategies Behind Paul Simon's Run for President, 1987-88**

Ideas. That word best describes the fifty-two years Paul Simon spent as a public person, journalist, politician, author, and head of a policy institute. His ideas flowed nonstop at the local community level, state legislature, and in Congress.

When Simon opened his 1987-88 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, he did what he always did: fed the public his ideas for solving the ills of the federal government and setting a national direction. As he stated in his announcement, “I dream of an America at work in a world at peace.” Straight stuff. But would voters outside familiar ground in Illinois buy it?

While ideas formed a lasting impression of Simon, his record of elective office in Illinois stood as a personal statement that Paul Simon belonged in the field for the Democratic nomination for president.

Nevertheless, he was a political nobody in the eyes of the national press when he announced his candidacy in April 1987. At best, he was just a fresh face in the United States Senate without much of a visible record. He had endorsed two candidates for the 1988 nomination, both of whom dropped out. It was no wonder the press labeled him a “long shot.”

On his home ground, a writer for the *Chicago Tribune* observed, “Most people probably will have these two reactions: Laughter and wonder about what Simon is smoking.”

Among many challenges, Simon needed a strong biography as a wedge with a half dozen others seeking the nomination who were inclined to look down their noses at the fellow from Illinois. He pointed out that he had more elective office experience than any of the others, but it took more than occasional mention to make the point.

Simon had remained in elective office for three decades. He stood as one of Illinois's most successful and durable politicians after World War II. The story was worth telling and repeating.

Excerpts of Simon's public career that appeared in *Candidates '88*, a book resulting from interviews shown on PBS, provide a concise summary of Simon's past, a perfect backdrop to details of the presidential quest.

“Picture the Simon of today (1987): the glasses, the bow tie, the kindly, earnest face. Now dissolve to the 19-year-old Simon of forty years ago, a skinny, gawky kid who has just dropped out of a small Nebraska college to buy a near-bankrupt newspaper in Troy, Illinois, with a few bucks scraped together from loans and savings. Installing himself as editor, the kid sets out to change the world. He bangs out fiery editorials. Braving bomb threats, he crusades against local gambling and corruption . . . Soon, he takes on the local political machine and wins a seat in the state legislature, where he shocks his colleagues by exposing widespread bribery among them in an article for *Harper's* magazine. He goes on to the state senate, the lieutenant governorship, the U. S. House of Representatives, and the U. S. Senate. All the while, he knocks out books with titles like *You Want to Change the World, So Change It* on his trusty manual typewriter.”

“Of course, that's not the whole story. Simon is also a political realist who learned how to survive in the rough and tumble of Illinois politics—so much so that he lost a bid

for the gubernatorial nomination in 1972 because voters thought he was too close to Richard Daley, the boss of Chicago. But no one ever questioned his decency or integrity, and in 1988, he ran for president as a traditional, non-neo-anything Democrat. He invoked the names of Roosevelt, Truman, and Humphrey, advocated large-scale New Deal-type programs, and defended the old faith of “a government that cares.”

This was the biographical picture Simon and his advisors offered consistently to Iowa voters and was repeated by media. The rest of the story is more complicated.

While Simon charted a familiar course aimed at the Iowa caucuses in February 1988 (35 years ago), paid consultants tugged at the candidate to sharpen his appeal and handle ideas accordingly. His papers at Southern Illinois University reveal how advisors pushed, pulled, and battled for Simon’s mind and campaign approach as long as Simon remained a viable candidate.

Simon’s campaign hired two primary campaign advisors (he also received critiques from friends and staff). The first, starting on May 1, 1987, was Vic Fingerhut at Fingerhut and Madison Opinion Research and Communications, Inc., for an assortment of advice on media and pitches to unions. In September, Simon signed on with Axelrod and Associates in Chicago, primarily the voice of owner David Axelrod, a former political reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, who managed Simon’s campaign in his 1984 victory against Sen. Charles Percy. Before September 1987, when his firm signed a contract with the campaign, Axelrod was on the prowl, sending comments and advice from the field.

Simon’s late entry in the primary contest handicapped the campaign. Other candidates had soaked up experienced staffers, financial contributions, and the cream of

the national advisory corps. For example, Axelrod had not worked on a national presidential campaign at that stage in his career. Fingerhut had no special expertise in Iowa.

In his book on the campaign, *Winners and Losers: The 1988 Race for the Presidency—One Candidate's Perspective*, Simon commented, “I made public my intention to run for president nineteen months before the general election and one of the things I heard from knowledgeable people over and over: You’re too late. If I worked at it as long as Dick Gephardt or Bruce Babbitt, Jack Kemp or George Bush, my odds of winning would have improved significantly. . .How can you, in a free country where freedom of speech is protected, prevent anyone from beginning to run for president at any time he or she wants?”

Simon’s close friend and advisor, Dr. John Jackson, said it succinctly: “I knew that it was already late; that other candidates, particularly Mike Dukakis, had already raised a lot of money and had soaked up the key staff and advisers and endorsers who can make a major difference in a race like this. The presidential nomination race is like running for the Senate or Governor for the first time, [times] 50. You have to mount a fifty-state race and have a national strategy with multiple layers of state-by-state analysis and strategy. Paul was well-known and very popular in Illinois. He was known and respected inside the Senate, but he was hardly a household name at that time. He also had some rudimentary national network by then but hardly at the level required.”

In April 1987—before his official launch on May 18—Simon hit the campaign trail, realizing every moment was precious with the caucuses eleven months away and his opponents already tested. He hardly had time to breathe before Axelrod offered

comments. In an April 20 memorandum to Simon's campaign director, Axelrod recited observations from a Chicago columnist. "He said Paul wasn't able to clearly articulate his rationale for running or the things that distinguish him from the pack."

Axelrod stated, "It just doesn't seem to me like Paul has his act together. I hate to keep belaboring the same point time and again, but Paul must project a more coherent message than simply spewing forth a litany of issues (jobs, education, long-term health care for the elderly, and arms control) and names from the past, when asked why he is running. That is not a message."

In reference to the 1984 campaign against Senator Percy, Axelrod said, "Paul Simon didn't get elected to the U.S. Senate so much on the basis of issues. He won on the basis of his character, integrity, compassion, and a sense that he believed deeply in certain principles."

The consultant added, "I believe that for Paul to be successful, we must once again build a campaign around his personal qualities, which really are what distinguish him from the others. That's not to say that the issues he's identified aren't an integral part of the argument. But the issues shouldn't be the whole argument because, when it comes right down to it, his positions are not so distinct from what the other candidates are saying, nor are 'positions' what ultimately wins presidential elections."

"All the polling I've seen, including the latest Washington Post-ABC poll, suggests that the qualities people are most searching for in a candidate are honesty and candor, which happen to be Paul's greatest strengths and are particularly important in this era."

“Once again, I am pitching for the Mr. Smith Goes to Washington strategy, the idea that among a group of sterile, blow-dried candidates there is one authentic leader who believes deeply in some time-honored principles.”

“Frankly, Paul will not win a contest based on ideas and issues, for a variety of reasons. He might, however, win a contest based on character and integrity.”

“Here’s a guy who as a young, crusading newspaper editor, fought organized crime in his county and defeated the mob candidate for a seat in the state legislature.”

“Here’s a guy who led the way on civil rights in the state legislature while representing deep, southern Illinois district. He risked his political career for that sacred American principle that all men truly are created equal.”

“Here’s a guy who was ostracized by his fellow legislators—who suffered the silent treatment for years—for publicly exposing the pernicious influence of the racetrack lobby on government in Illinois.”

“And yet he also was one of the most productive members and ultimately emerged as the party’s choice for lieutenant governor and governor.”

“Why? Because even the pols came to respect his honesty and decency, and more importantly, so did the people of Illinois.”

“And throughout his years in Congress and the Senate, he’s maintained those high standards, occasionally taking on his friends—and risking political damage—to do what he felt was right.”

“I say this respectfully: If you think this chant of ‘Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy’ over and over and over again is more powerful than the Paul Simon story, you’re nuts.”



“The truth is Paul’s story beautifully sets up the second part of the equation—his fealty to the traditional commitments of the Democratic Party. It says that Paul Simon, to borrow a phrase, is willing “to sail against the wind” with his principles and those of the Democratic Party.”

“This is what makes him different than the rest, not the fact that he punctuates his sentences with ‘Roosevelt and Truman.’”

Meanwhile, Vic Fingerhut was pushing his ideas for the Simon campaign. In script suggestions for a video campaign aimed largely at union audiences, Fingerhut offered these soundbites:

“I’m the one candidate for President not ashamed to run—publicly—as the Democrat representing the true Democratic tradition of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy. The tradition of representing American working people.”

Fingerhut suggested further:

“Today, the American labor movement is under greater attack than in any time in my adult life.”

“Plants closing. Wages cut. Pensions threatened. And, from the shop floor to the corporate boardroom and to the White House, the union busters are riding high.”

“This attack on working men and women must not go unanswered.”

“Prosperity in America must be prosperity for all, not just the few.”

“Some people tell me: Get rid of your bow tie, your horned-rimmed glasses, change your views to make them more acceptable to the latest fashion. To those people, I say: look at Harry Truman. He wore a bow tie and horn-rimmed glasses, and he wasn’t afraid to stand up for ordinary Americans.”

“Paul Simon is not rethinking his values. I’m not looking for new ways to make my party acceptable to the privileged. I know what side I’m on. The same side I’ve been on my entire life, the side of the American working people.”

The script—there is no record of how much Simon used—outlined ideas for “putting America back to work.” Those included trade legislation to save industries and a national infrastructure plan “to rebuild America’s old and decaying roads, harbors, and bridges. And my administration will fight to make sure that work will not be done by union-busting, double-breasted companies.”

In a later defense of his strategy, Fingerhut stated, “Simon’s astonishing success in these videotapes demonstrated dramatically that Simon had appeal to ordinary people, not just Washington insiders and intellectuals.”

Thus, the two sides of the consultant ledger. Various forms of the battle continued throughout the 1987-88 campaign.

While the Simon campaign struggled to get its footing, filling staff openings, fashioning a realistic budget, and looking anywhere for funding, the candidate remaining indefatigable.

Axelrod wrote Simon in June: “Obviously, on one level, things are going well. As we all knew going in, you are well-suited for Iowa, where so much of the terrain is familiar in style and even appearance, and your classic material is well received, as it was in Illinois in 1984. The people I chatted with spoke approvingly of your sincerity and decency. They use words like ‘warm’ and ‘caring and the situation is fluid. If you get the bodies out in the field to reap the supporters you are sewing, things could go very well.”

“Your stump speech is much improved, with a strong emphasis on character and principles. As I’ve said before, these are your strong suits and, ultimately what could separate you from the field.”

“I still have some questions.”

“Are the principal issues you outline—jobs, education, long-term health care, and arms control—showing up in polling as paramount in the minds of Iowans? What about the condition of agriculture or the environment or several other issues that came up repeatedly in questions?”

Finally, Axelrod came to a sensitive point. “Much of your rhetoric addresses people on the fringes—the unemployed, the handicapped, the senior citizens overwrought by medical expenses.

“But what about the rest of us? What do you say to people who are neither particularly secure nor acutely distressed? Many of these are younger voters who are vaguely uncomfortable about the future, with good reason.”

After an early July debate of Democratic contenders in which press reports placed Simon high in praise, Axelrod wrote briefly on July 15, referring to an article in the *Chicago Tribune* by Jon Margolis. The author quotes pollsters Peter Hart and Geoffrey Garin thusly: “An underlying feeling of uncertainty about America’s future will control the political environment of the presidential contest. Voters are not unhappy about where the country is today, but they have nagging doubts, and they sense that things have come to a standstill.” Margolis mentioned several Democratic candidates in the article, Dukakis, Gebhardt, Gore, Jesse Jackson, Biden, and added their comments. Simon was

not mentioned, indicating that his campaign had not yet surfaced as serious in the media's eyes.

Axelrod said briefly, "This Peter Hart quote goes right to the core of what I wrote in the memo I gave you a few weeks ago in Chicago. I feel strongly that you must expand your rhetoric and your vision to address this sense of anxiety so many Americans share about the future."

In September, Simon ended his contract with Fingerhut and signed with Axelrod and Associates, Chicago. No reason is given in the papers of the campaign. Simon may have felt that Axelrod better fit the picture for the last half of the drive to the Iowa caucuses. As might be expected, Fingerhut appeared perplexed—and unhappy—by the decision.

The unhappiness of Fingerhut is illustrative of the changing campaign organization needs over a changing political environment, related to polling results, lagging crowds at events, slowed fundraising, and the general weariness of sleepless nights. In the case of Fingerhut and Axelrod, this could reflect worry over costs and questioning of strategy. With that in mind, Fingerhut response to rejection deserves attention.

In a lengthy memorandum dated September 30, 1987, addressed to Simon with a copy to key campaign leader Floyd Fithian, Vic Fingerhut pleads his case. "We are still advancing the case in the media (and among our labor friends) for "why a Simon candidacy" makes sense for Democrats and will be successful."

"There is clearly a spill-over from the first four months of the campaign when (beyond what our contract with the Simon Campaign called for) we spent considerable

time, first, establishing and then advancing with the national media (and labor) the political legitimacy and “winnability” of the Simon campaign. I know you have personally seen at least a few of the fruits of these public relations efforts.”

“However, as we are already being questioned about the ‘shakeup’ in the Simon campaign by our labor friends and since we are no longer officially part of the Simon campaign, it is increasingly difficult for us to be aggressive advocates of the campaign among political writers journalists and labor leaders.”

“Every time we press your case in the media, we broaden our exposure for possible embarrassment of being publicly humiliated by announcement that we have been dismissed, replaced, superseded, etc.”

“Since this is a campaign which we did not solicit and upon which we have already expended considerable time and money beyond your contract requirements, I know you would not expect us to continue to actively play the role of your public relations firm at the national level trying to make up for serious gaps in the campaign itself in selling your candidacy among key media and political opinion leaders.”

The memo lists a number of successes, according to Fingerhut, including a rise in polls and substantial increases in support from labor unions. If Simon or campaign officials responded to Fingerhut, it may have been done unofficially.

Adding support to Fingerhut’s comments about Simon’s progress with labor unions, an article on October 12 in the *Washington Post* (“Simon Cuts Gephardt’s Labor Support”) stated, “Although many continue to doubt his electability, Sen. Paul Simon has been chipping away at support for Rep. Richard A. Gephardt in organized labor, one of the most important constituencies in the Iowa Democratic caucuses. . . Simon, a late

starter in the Democratic contest, has picked up the personal endorsements of a number of union chiefs—not only in Iowa cities near the Illinois border but also from machinists and building trades officials here (Des Moines) in the center of the state. . . Simon’s ability to compete with Gephardt among leaders of organized labor has been demonstrated by his showing in a number of straw polls at union meetings. At both a UAW meeting Saturday morning and a union-backed rally that afternoon, a significant number of union members wore Simon buttons.”

By November, Simon’s poll number had improved immeasurably. With success came increased criticism by other candidates and skepticism from the media, who questioned Simon’s ideas of a balanced budget and increasing costly social programs.

Given years of widespread support by newspapers and TV stations across Illinois, including Chicago, Simon was unaccustomed to broad media criticism or doubts about his candidacy. Campaign opponents of Simon often complained of media bias. This was in spite of mild criticism by Simon of Chicago newspapers for not pressing investigations of corruption in the legislature. His policy support for open meetings and finance disclosure among elected officials resonated well with the media, although not with elected officials.

National media events scheduled for December would offer extraordinary opportunities for Simon. A TV debate on December 1 and a series of PBS interviews put a spotlight on Simon, whose polling figures put him in the nomination hunt.

In a November 25 memorandum to Simon, Axelrod addressed the criticism and offered advice about its meaning and how Simon should respond. He wrote:

“I know that we are taking a great deal of flack right now—the kind that comes with serious contention. And I know that it has been tough on the front lines.”

“The attacks from the media and our opponents are designed to prove that Simon—though billed as a gutsy principled leader—is just another pol who is trying to be all things to all people. They understand the source of our budding strength, and they are anxious to knock us off the pedestal.”

“Let’s not be intimidated.”

Continuing to strengthen Simon’s backbone, Axelrod added, “I believe the argument is largely an insider’s argument, similar to the ones we heard against Carter in 1976 and Reagan in 1980. One of the reasons it is not ferocious is the frustration the press and our opponents feel over the fact that Paul is taking the game away from them, appealing over their heads. The worst mistake we could make would be to retreat now and get tangled up in explanations or, worse, in specifics that could be construed as a major tax increase proposal.”

One of the often-expressed criticisms of Simon was his continued declaration that the federal budget should be balanced while meeting challenges faced by society. Axelrod stated, “He is saying, ‘We can do it,’ while the press and our opponents are saying ‘No we can’t.’ I don’t think the American people want negativism, doubt, and hand-wringing. They want a president who sets lofty goals and approaches them with confidence. Frankly, it was one of Reagan’s great appeals.”

Axelrod made a number of recommendations for TV and radio spots designed to display firmness and confidence in his policy proposals, such as the candidate’s TV ad

statement, “Some say we can’t afford to make these commitments. I say we can’t afford not to.”

Cheerleading as best he could, Axelrod said, “The only concession I would make to the hectoring hordes of insiders is to ever so slightly sharpen up the last resort answer: ‘If, after implanting these steps, there is still a gap, I would then look at raising revenues. But it cannot be at the expense of the average American family.’”

Axelrod concluded, “Again, we should look at this debate as an opportunity rather than a threat. This is no time to become faint of heart and allow the media and our opponents to dictate the terms of the debate. Remember, they’re after us because we’re winning.”

The December 1 television debate, which seemed to run endlessly but continued for two hours, included Republican and Democratic candidates in separate sessions. *USA Today*’s headline caught the flavor: “Debate: Jabs, jokes, no jolts.”

On the “jabs side, Simon took direct hits. In the time devoted to domestic issues, Gebhardt accused Simon, “who has been surging in the polls recently,” of being a “promise-as-you-go” candidate. He added, “Simonomics is really Reaganomics with a bow tie.” Not to be left out, Bruce Babbitt of Arizona accused Gebhardt and Simon of “flimflam.” Babbitt summarized, “There aren’t a lot of profiles in courage here.”

An Associated Press report stated, “Simon appeared flustered.” The candidate later confirmed the observation: “I wasn’t quite happy with my response. I had one minute to respond.” He took 3.5 minutes. In that time, he mentioned three sources of increased revenue to pay for his policies:

1. “You reduce Pentagon spending by about 6%.”



2. “You move on trade policy in very specific terms, in terms of tax breaks we now have [that] encourage industries to move outside the United States.”
3. “Conservatively, you can reduce unemployment 1.5%. That’s a \$45-billion reduction.”

He summarized, “Those three things together are \$95 billion.”

The mass candidate concept tested voter interest and patience, with an abundance of candidates in both parties, an overload of verbiage, and the usual onslaught of media pontificators.

Among national media taking notice of Simon were *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*.

David Broder, a *Washington Post* writer, mentioned the differences between “Simon’s liberal House voting record and his independent-sounding stump speeches.” Broder said Simon’s “beliefs are a bit of a hodgepodge.”

Writer David Shribman of the *Wall Street Journal* referred to the candidate’s “elusive philosophy.” Shribman stated, “His image as the modest country editor of a half-century ago isn’t his only incongruity. However, he is a vigorous champion of the labor movement, and yet he believes a split minimum wage providing for a lower rate for young people is worth trying as an experiment. He calls himself a ‘pay-as-you-go Democrat’ but, besides the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Mr. Simon is the only Democrat who is a strong advocate for major new domestic spending.” Shribman quoted Simon’s response to the critics: “People want someone who is going to play it straight, to level with them. People understand I’m not just holding my fingers to the wind, that there’s a base of conviction.”

In a lengthy profile for the *New York Times*, appearing a week after the debate, Robin Toner touched on Simon's policy ideas and funding. She also went into considerable detail on the candidate's personal and political biography. She brought readers up to date with Simon. "At first, the 59-year-old freshman senator was considered the oddity in the Democratic race: at best, the tribune for party liberals of the old school; at worst, an anachronism who wandered into the wrong election when Democrats were straining to demonstrate their fiscal responsibility."

"But while the more glamorous Democrats stumbled and fell, he endured, rising to first place in the Iowa polls this fall. He projects a steadiness and a solidness that consultants dream of—'He's the grown-up in the race,' says a former adviser, and much of his personal history could come from the pages of *Boy's Life*."

After the litany of Simon's proposed social programs, she wrote, "Mr. Simon has long styled himself a reformer; a man outside of politics as usual. It is a central theme on the campaign trail, where he talks time and again about the consultants who advised him to change his hair, get rid of his eyeglasses, and abandon his bow tie. It has become a sort of reverse charisma, an anti-image image that has entranced many voters looking for some essential realness in their candidates."

About his appeal to rural audiences, Toner wrote, "In the small groups where he is at his best, in the small-town restaurants and community centers of Iowa, they nod their heads and share his outrage" about unemployment and business failures.

"He's always had the ability to take the edge off his liberalism," said Don Rose, a Chicago political consultant who had watched Simon for years. "He's a liberal who

doesn't scare people." Toner added, "In short, Mr. Simon's liberalism embraces the middle class; his idealism has a shrewdly tactical edge."

Digging into Simon's government belief system, Toner wrote, "Mr. Simon's belief in the power of government will not be fettered." She also observed, "As Mr. Simon moves up in the polls, his good intentions are increasingly being audited by his rivals, by other Democrats, by assorted experts. How, they ask, can he fulfill his promises? On the campaign trail, he can make it seem blissfully simple. . . Still, to some politicians, Mr. Simon's deficit-reducing proposal is less a realistic plan of action than a wish list."

Cheek to jowl with the December debates was the PBS series of interviews with candidates. Simon signed up for December 6 before a live audience. TV personality Marvin Kalb was the interviewer of "A Conversation with Paul Simon."

Kalb spent much of the program, after a rundown of Simon's biography, seeking answers to how the candidate, if elected, would finance the array of social programs on the table. Kalb directed the questions, seeking specifics. "I'd like us to try to be, if it is at all possible, specific on the costs of these programs. How are you going to pay for all of those additional government-funded programs and at the same time knock down the budget deficit to zero in three years? How would you do that?" "How much?" Simon never answered with specifics, preferring to wind a plan with general ideas. Kalb expressed disappointment.

The two touched briefly on Simon's money shortage compared to other candidates. Of all the campaign issues, lack of money was a worrying presence for Simon and his followers. Simon responded by expressing more interest in person-to-person

contact and campaigning than in high-priced TV ads. He added, “Frankly, my voting record is such that as you tick off the major contributing financial interests, my voting record is not a good one for getting campaign financing.”

Given an opportunity to separate his record from others, Simon stated, “Number one, I bring more experience in government than any of the other candidates, particularly experience in foreign affairs and in dealing with the economy. Number two, I really have a commitment to make the kind of investments we have to make. I don’t shy away from using the tools of government.”

As part of the Simon communications effort, the campaign published *PS/Iowa*, a newsletter sent widely with joyful articles about the candidate and a plea for contributions and volunteers in the state. Much of the presentation reflected consultant recommendations for reaching out to a broad constituency, discussing agriculture issues, and emphasizing traditional party and personal values. At the root of the various pitches was dependence on increased government activity, combined with talk of revised revenue sources and a measure of frugality.

Simon stated, “It is time for the president of the United States to fill leadership posts with champions of the needy rather than cronies of the greedy. It is time once again that Washington and Wall Street follow the example of Main Street—don’t spend money you don’t have.”<sup>14</sup> It reminded readers that Simon voted against the 1986 tax reform bill, saying it was “irresponsible to cut taxes for the rich while rolling up the largest budget deficit in history.”

Since October, Simon and associates had been working with a written strategy that projected activities to February 8 in Iowa. The plan laid out a scheme in five phases,

involving direct voter contact, paid media, press efforts, and a program for activities in the field, meaning unexpected circumstances.

The plan “situation” recognized Simon had much to accomplish. Among those points: “The Senator has been in the state a significant amount of time thus far, and it has paid dividends. It is likely that the senator is still not known very well by the probable caucus attenders.” The plan also noted, “Our field staff is too small and needs to be larger if we are to ensure that we are properly prepared for caucus night precinct-by-precinct.” The target for the reach strategy: 77,000 likely caucus attenders, identified from 1980 and 1984 attenders and state party activists, designed “to communicate the senator’s biography and character as our initial message to the targets—as opposed to a litany of issue positions.” Plans looked good on paper, but real events had an impact on whether they worked.

During this period, Simon prepared a “white paper” which laid out detailed plans for a presidency. Formally titled “Paul Simon: Domestic Policy Directions for the 1990s,” and written by the candidate, he explained the meat of his domestic and foreign agendas, not backing down despite widespread criticism. It reinforced an image of Simon as a thinking liberal determined to provide a program for national needs. He started with a section titled “Balance the Budget.” For the doubters, he said the program “I’ve outlined, implemented in a disciplined fashion, can achieve the necessary deficit reduction by 1992 without resorting to a general tax increase. If, however, when I examine the budget, I inherit and find that a larger down payment will be necessary to balance the budget, I will not duck the hard choices on the revenue side. I am committed to balancing the budget.” He failed to point out the role of Congress in a final outcome.

Everything was upbeat in the Simon camp until December 15, when Gary Hart re-entered the race. He had dropped out in the wake of a scandal in May. Almost within hours, he shot to the top of polls, and Simon slipped to second, with half the number of Hart. A month from voting, Simon was fighting for survival.

Internally, campaign managers and consultants debated whether to change tactics and attack the one rival who seemed to be gaining strength: U.S. Rep. Richard Gebhardt of Missouri. Some wanted Simon to go on the attack, and others preferred the image of “Uncle Paul.” At one point, Simon backed off an attack, stating, “Some suggestions were made to me that I vetoed. I’m not absolutely ruling anything out, but my present inclination is not to go to negative commercials.” And he didn’t.

Instead, Simon launched a two-commercial campaign. In one, cartoon caricatures of Simon were shown while the candidate says, “My bowtie, in a sense, is a declaration of independence.” The other ad contained testimonials by Iowa residents.

Axelrod said of this strategy: “This has always been the edge we have.”

Six weeks after the December *New York Times* article by Stoner, the changing tides of Simon’s campaign were addressed further in an article on January 29, just days before the vote. The reporter recapped events, “Throughout last fall, after jumping to the front of the polls in Iowa and finding an unmistakable link with many of its voters, Senator Paul Simon of Illinois campaigned as the different politician.”

“He was old school in a field of new-generation Democrats. He was warm in what was often a chilly debate over issues. He managed to present himself as almost nonpolitical, above the scrambling for a position that consumed his rivals.” She noted that the landscape had changed in the ensuing weeks with an evaporating lead. The

challenges: “How to fight back and regain the lead, against a stiff challenge from Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, yet retain the image that proved so entrancing to Iowans last fall.”

Toner captured the inside campaign turmoil over how Simon should respond to pressures. After Simon temporarily went on the attack against Gephardt, “Mr. Simon seems uncomfortable on the offensive, and in a swing through Iowa this week, he muted his criticisms. ‘They would like me to get into a fight every day. That’s not my style. I have to be myself.’”

After zigs and zags, the campaign moved back to its basic appeal as January ended, stressing “Mr. Simon’s character and his commitment to ‘a government that cares.’”

“At this point,” said advisor Axelrod, “We don’t see any point in getting taken off the message to some kind of search and destroy mission.”

Toner concluded, “Mr. Simon himself does not have the demeanor of a man who has lost a sizable lead. ‘I think we’re going to make it. I basically feel pretty good about it. But the world isn’t going to fall apart for me if I don’t.’”

In his book about the campaign, Simon looked back on the advertising issue and attempted to put the subject in an after-the-battle perspective.

“On my ads, the biographical spots were exceedingly well done, deserving of a 9 rating. The issue ads were less effective. I would rank them 7. . .The deficiency of the issue ads ultimately was my responsibility. Handling my media was David Axelrod and Associates, a Chicago-based firm that [was] still relatively new in the field. . .

He has good political antennae, and his company will develop into one of the best political media firms in the nation.”

Simon continued, “But on the issues in Iowa, our material lacked some of the appeal and spark it needed. There have also been criticisms of the timing of our ads, suggesting that more of our fire should have been saved for the last days of the campaign, less early in our endeavor. We ran some of our television ads early to establish my credentials as a real contender. Precisely what the right mix should have been is a judgment call, but since we lost, the critics can speak with a greater air of authority. Incredibly, we made two major errors that I can only blame on myself: As the only real rural candidate in the race in rural Iowa, we did not stress my rural roots in our television spots; and as the candidate with the strongest program on long-term care for seniors in a state with the highest percentage of older Americans, we did not stress that.”

Simon turned attention to the choices presented and made in January 1988. “My paid media people wanted me to go with the ‘comparative’ television ads against Gephardt in Iowa. I declined, in part because I have always been a little uncomfortable with these unless they are really well done, in part because the inconsistencies in the Gephardt record I felt would be much more effectively covered by the media than they were until after the Iowa caucuses, and in part because negative campaigning is always a two-edged sword, particularly in Iowa where there is a strong sense of what is decent and fair and what is not. I finally compromised and permitted some radio ads comparing our records. In retrospect, some television ads tastefully done, pointing out differences, probably would have helped. My media people were right, and I turned out to be wrong.”



The race had narrowed to a three-way battle among Simon, Gebhardt, and Dukakis, Hart having faded. Short of funds, Simon crisscrossed the state in search of caucus votes. Press releases flew, and Jeanne and family rarely rested. Simon wasn't the only one; his rivals kept a similar pace; together, they blanketed the state and filled newscasts and newspapers.

Ten days before the caucus, the *Des Moines Register* announced its endorsement of Simon, declaring, "Of the Democratic contenders, we believe Simon has the makings of the best prudent candidate. What the record shows is a man who has decent instincts and who sticks by them. Once before, in troubled times, the nation turned to an unpretentious man from downstate Illinois. The times are not quite as troubled now, and perhaps the man is not as great, but he is good, honest, and eager to turn the energies of government toward long-neglected needs. Paul Simon would be the best nominee for the Democratic Party."

It was not enough. Simon finished second to Gebhardt. Plan A was to win in Iowa and then ride that momentum to a victory in New Hampshire a week later. There was no Plan B.

The campaign slumped in New Hampshire, where Simon finished third behind Dukakis and Gebhardt.

Perhaps more devastating to the candidate, an internal audit showed the campaign with a deficit of about \$500,000. Simon had insisted to staff that he wanted to maintain a break-even result. Unnerved by the news, he reached out to Illinois banker and close friend Jerry Sinclair for a more precise look at the books.

Sinclair's audit placed the debt at \$1.3 million (an estimated 2.5 million dollars in 2023). As Simon looked ahead at more primaries, the outlook dimmed considerably, although contributions began to lower the debt, and eventually, the books balanced, not easy for a losing candidate. Simon said he would stay in the race, but the picture did not improve, with the exception of Illinois.

Simon later put matters in perspective. "My financial situation forced me to make a decision between borrowing about two million dollars needed to mount an effective campaign in the Super Tuesday states or bypass those states, hoping to carry Illinois despite precedents that you don't win in your state if you fail to carry other states."

The Illinois primary had two pieces. The candidate vote, a "beauty contest," meant nothing when it came to claiming delegates to the convention. Voters in congressional districts determined the actual delegate count. Reflecting the serious financial situation, Simon said he would not buy any television advertising in Illinois. Instead, he counted heavily on name recognition and the residue of pride in the 1984 victory over Charles Percy.

"I spent not one dime on television advertising," Simon declared in a memo to special friends and advisors. Days before voting, Chicago newspapers claimed Simon's lead had dropped and Jesse Jackson, a strong Chicago influence, had climbed. In the final tally, Simon won with 42 percent of the vote and Jackson 32 percent. Thus, Simon's lone primary victory. In the separate votes for delegates, Simon claimed 136.

Momentarily, Simon had life, and press reports spoke of an unsettled nomination race, although Dukakis led. With Simon's campaign hanging on and having avoided the Michigan primary, he hoped for victory in nearby Wisconsin. Simon finished fourth and

suspended his campaign, announcing the decision at a press conference. One reporter wrote, “He said he had no regrets, that running for the presidency was an ‘exhilarating experience’ allowing him to learn more about the country.” He remained upbeat to the end. His family seemed to take it harder, at least in public. Dukakis won the nomination and received Simon’s full support.

As a man of words for much of his life, Paul Simon painted the best possible picture of the adventure. What would it prove to complain? And Simon was not a complainer. The outcome confirmed that the road to victory is an endurance race, not a sprint.

Second-guessing strategies, decisions, and results are part of political rhetoric after most failed campaigns. Simon is no exception. Beyond analysis, the facts remain that he had too little time and too little money to continue. Time-pressure made it difficult to frame a coherent policy agenda beyond “America at work, the world at peace.”

We are left with questions. Did Paul’s ideas influence those of the eventual nominee, Dukakis? There is little evidence. In published reflections on the 1988 Dukakis-Bush outcome, there is no sign of Simon. Was his campaign historically significant? His firm imprint on political history remains in Illinois.

One of the winners was Axelrod, for whom, as one adviser to Simon said, “This was clearly a learning experience, and he took it to a whole higher level in [Barack] Obama’s 2008 campaign. He is clearly a brilliant thinker on these matters, although he gained that status later. Paul gave him his start, as he did for a lot of other successful political people in the next generation.”

Despite the demands of campaigning in 1987-88, Simon turned quickly to his 1990 re-election campaign. Against a Republican with a strong conservative voting record and successful campaign experience, Simon faced speculation for a tough battle. He won the race for a second term by a record margin, proving again his strength among Illinois constituents and erasing any thoughts that his presidential loss had damaged Simon's standing with home-state voters.

He stepped down in 1997 after completion of the six-year term. The growing partisan anger in Washington and across the nation, combined with the prospect of raising millions of dollars for a third-term campaign, pushed him toward the next phase of service: establishing the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. He remained a man of ideas until his death in 2003.

**Paul Simon Public Policy Institute**  
**Southern Illinois University**  
**Mail Code 4429**  
**1231 Lincoln Drive**  
**Carbondale, Illinois 62901**

**618/453-4009**  
**[paulsimoninstitute@siu.edu](mailto:paulsimoninstitute@siu.edu)**  
**[www.paulsimoninstitute.org](http://www.paulsimoninstitute.org)**



**SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY**  
**PAUL SIMON**  
**PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE**