

Running for Office



THE FOURTEENTH CONGRESSIONAL District basically encompassed inner-city Pittsburgh: downtown, several comfortable residential neighborhoods, and some of our most segregated and poverty-ridden sectors. It was multiethnic, with Irish, Italian, Polish and other Eastern European strains predominating, and vital black and Jewish communities. Democrats outnumbered Republicans by over three to one, and the area had long been represented by a Democratic congressman.

The four-term incumbent was William S. Moorhead Jr., a wealthy lawyer from a prominent Pittsburgh family, who had been handpicked by the Lawrence machine in 1958. He was a good congressman and his campaigns had been easy ones, as the organization was able to turn out a strong vote every two years. In fact, Bill Moorhead was to prove unbeatable, retiring after twenty years of service in 1978.

Ginny and I had no particular issues on which to challenge Moorhead and no illusions about our ability to win the seat. We knew, however, that we had to test our interest in running for public office. Besides, we expected minimal competition for the nomination, and the opportunity to be nominated for an office of such prominence might not recur.

Al Capozzi acted as campaign manager, and Elsie Hillman offered her friendship, enthusiasm and financial backing. We eventually recruited a

larger group of able campaigners, but Ginny and I did most of the heavy lifting at the outset. On February 11, we drove to all the local newspapers and radio and television stations to hand-deliver my announcement and a campaign biography. Saturday's *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* carried a small story headlined "Seeking Congress Seat, Thornburgh Declares," while the afternoon *Pittsburgh Press* followed with an even smaller entry, buried in the back pages and more realistically entitled "Lawyer Seeking Moorhead Seat."

Ginny took charge of an ambitious effort to accumulate signatures on nominating petitions and recruited a hundred or so of our friends and acquaintances to circulate these papers door to door across the district. They were to congregate at our house on February 18 to pick up their petitions and get instructions and a pep talk. Early that morning, we received the saddest news possible. My mother, weakened by a stroke, had died peacefully in her sleep the night before. Ginny and I decided to go ahead with our event nonetheless, as we hoped my mom would have wished. (When she had seen the newspaper articles about my candidacy, she had called me, weeping with pride.) We somehow mustered the strength to distribute petitions to the enthusiastic crowd of volunteers, whose efforts produced some 7,500 signatures. We told only a few close friends of our loss so as not to take the edge off this generous outpouring of friendship and support. But it was a very long and taxing day.

We spent most of the primary campaign at Republican ward meetings, soliciting the endorsement of the organization, for what it was worth. A similarly inexperienced primary opponent named Tom Raith had emerged, so the exercise was not academic. Our one significant rally—at the North Side Carnegie Hall, a traditional Democratic site—was a huge success, attended by 500 or so loudly cheering Republicans. In retrospect, the campaign probably peaked on that April evening, as we were unable thereafter to duplicate similar crowds or enthusiasm. However, in the primary on May 17, we corralled 78 percent of the meager Republican turnout.

Bigger news for us was Ginny's pregnancy. Although again "unplanned," it was most welcome, particularly in view of the loss of my mother, our beloved "Nana." As so often happens, the Lord seemed to couple the tragedy of death with the joy of birth to remind us of the fine balance He seeks to maintain in our lives.

The campaign, now chaired by John Heinz, had come together quite

well on the substantive side, aided by superb research done by our volunteers. Most of the positions we articulated were to recur in my later career—most notably, a hard line against organized crime and official corruption; a concern for the elderly; a focus on urban problems; a strong civil rights position; support for an effective United Nations; conservative fiscal policies supplemented by support for federal revenue sharing; and attention to transportation problems, job training and public education. Notably missing were such later hot-button issues as abortion, gun control and homosexual rights, which were not even on anyone's agenda in 1966.

Financing was also smoothly handled. I was determined not to put any of my own funds into the effort or expose my family to any financial liability. We raised \$75,000 to support the campaign, an amount that was then above the average for Pennsylvania congressional campaigns.

Ginny took charge of getting our literature into the hands of every possible voter through door-to-door distribution. She attacked her task with astonishing vigor and recruited a huge corps of volunteers. Our advertising and public relations featured a handsome brochure depicting me in a variety of settings. (The family picture portrayed a very pregnant Ginny and three sons looking not at all enthusiastic about the entire venture.)

We produced a billboard that showed me, with my crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses, holding an enormous wooden spoon; the accompanying message was "Dick Thornburgh will stir things up in Congress." This "stirred" considerable comment. We also ran a series of hilarious radio ads featuring local humorists. We generated a potpourri of campaign trinkets, such as emery boards, calorie counters, and baseball and football schedules with a somber Dick Thornburgh glaring out at the voter. I had somehow fastened on the idea of using Pittsburgh's official colors of gold and black on all our campaign materials, a combination mocked by most until years later, when a national survey concluded that these were the most effective colors that could be used! I also identified myself to voters as "Thornburgh as in Pittsburgh." (Different generations and individuals have spelled the Thornburgh name differently; some thirty variations included "burg," "borough," "brough," "borrow," "barrow," "burrow," "brugh," "bury," "berry," "boro" and "ber.") Voters may have learned from my quip how to spell my name, but they did not yet equate that with a desire to elect me.

We trekked endlessly through the district for old-fashioned door-to-door solicitations, stops at shopping centers and plant gates, and innumerable coffee sessions, for which hostesses had to be solicited and literature

provided. The coffees all got the same pitch—an explanation of the need for new leadership to replace the “rubber-stamp” incumbent and a description of how Pittsburgh would prosper from having me in Congress. I must often have sounded as if I were running for mayor, but I tackled these sessions with relish. Sometimes as many as fifty neighbors would respond to an invitation, but in one case, when a solitary soul showed up, she got the full treatment anyway.

One rarely publicized gastronomic challenge of retail politics was illustrated on the evening when, after a busy campaign day, I grabbed a quick supper of baked beans and hot dog chunks at home with the boys before heading out again. After my first speech, I was offered a large plate of baked beans and hot dogs, which I had to wolf down, lest I be perceived as ungrateful. I then went on to a public housing project in a staunchly Democratic area, where my area chairman (later convicted on homicide charges) had attracted only the local clergyman to hear my pitch. After an abbreviated speech, I was ushered into the chairman’s kitchen to savor his wife’s specialty—hot dogs and baked beans—which she had prepared in copious quantities in anticipation of a large turnout. Needless to say, when I arrived home that night, I felt as if I had a medicine ball in my stomach.

My transportation through all this was the Star Car, a clunker of a Rambler station wagon, painted white and festooned with red and blue stars and an enormous “Thornburgh for Congress.” The hit songs of 1966 (such as “Cherish,” “Downtown,” “Monday, Monday,” and “Summer in the City”) played over and over on the radio as I drove through Pittsburgh in search of votes and are indelibly implanted in my memory.

In the fall, Moorhead and I had three debates, the upshot of which was an accurate press verdict that we differed little on the issues. I nettled him somewhat by beginning a practice, followed in all my subsequent elections, of making a full financial disclosure. Moorhead, a millionaire, resisted this and, in those pre-Watergate days, got away with a “no comment.” My own disclosure did not go down particularly well with Ginny, who valued our privacy and felt these matters were nobody else’s business. She also felt compelled to explain to friends why we were worth so little!

Despite all our efforts, getting attention was difficult. We shot a television commercial but scrapped it, both because we lacked the funds for sufficient airtime and because I was blissfully unaware of the incredible effect this medium was to have on the political process. I was still a devotee of the print media and a more personal approach to politics. Our only big media plays came from piggybacking on the appearances of visiting digni-

taries, including gubernatorial candidate Ray Shafer, Senator Scott, and Philadelphia district attorney Arlen Specter.

Just before election day, one issue, then just beginning to attract public notice, commanded some attention. My uneasiness about the war in Vietnam prompted me to undertake some lengthy discussions with a developing group of antiwar activists in the academic community. Although I did not agree with many of their views, I found it most useful to hear them out and to obtain their input. My own position was that a negotiated settlement should be sought in discussions that included the Viet Cong and that a suspension of offensive military operations might be in order to help turn the tide. I stated my views in a carefully crafted paper and a well-received speech to some 1,500 attendees at a local speak-out on the war. That very night, however, Democratic boss David L. Lawrence was fatally stricken at a final rally for party candidates not two blocks away, and that, of course, was the big story.

Late in the campaign, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page article about the illegal Pittsburgh-area gambling operation of one Anthony Michael Grosso and the “protection” he was allegedly paying to local law enforcement officials. I issued a strident call for an investigation. While little response was forthcoming, both the corruption charges and Tony Grosso were to play major roles in my later career.

I believe to this day that we ran an excellent campaign, but there was no way that anyone, particularly an unknown, was going to beat Bill Moorhead. On election day, the margin was 82,732 to 38,528—slightly better than two to one. I took some minor solace in having cut into the Democrats’ three-to-one registration edge.

At 2:30 the next morning, Ginny and I were awakened by a frantic call informing us that the building next to our campaign headquarters had blown up and the headquarters was on fire. I rolled over and prepared to go back to sleep. I had not counted on Ginny, whose response was, “We have to rescue the volunteer cards! Let’s go!”

So off we went, in pouring rain, amid hoses, police, firefighters and knots of spectators, no doubt wondering what we were up to. Grabbing files by the armful, we ran toward our car. Ginny, eight months pregnant and exhausted, stumbled and dropped a file box into the gutter, which was awash with rainwater and the output of the fire hoses. Our three-by-five cards with all their valuable intelligence began to float away, the ink already running. In one last, superhuman effort, Ginny scooped up most of the spilled cards, and we returned home to bed. Later, we realized

how fortunate it was that when the explosion occurred, the building was not full of celebrating campaign workers, as it would have been if we had won.

Three days after the election, on November 11, William Field Thornburgh surprised us by entering the world three weeks before we expected him. Bill Moorhead sent us a dozen roses in his honor.

ALL OUR EFFORT, of course, was not for naught. Ginny and I discovered how much we enjoyed the campaign process—meeting voters, puzzling through our positions on difficult issues, feeling that we could make a difference for the better in people’s lives. Many friends and supporters from this campaign stayed with us throughout my public career. The reviews of our effort were generally favorable. Finally, the campaign solidified my relationship with Senator Scott’s office and got us off on a good footing with soon-to-be Senator Richard Schweiker. These relationships were to prove advantageous later, when the powers that be were deciding who should become U.S. attorney for western Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile, another Thornburgh campaign was soon under way. Ray Shafer, who had won the gubernatorial race, had made constitutional reform a priority for his administration, and in the spring of 1967 the voters approved the assembling of a limited constitutional convention. Three delegates were to be elected from each state senatorial district, and in each district, no more than two could be from the same party. I sought and obtained my party’s designation as one of its two candidates from my heavily Democratic Forty-third District. The other was Robert Doyle, an attorney and former FBI agent.

My two primary emphases in the campaign were reform of the minor judiciary and reorganization of local government, particularly its consolidation into “efficient and responsive governing units,” as I stated to the *Pittsburgh Press*. This bordered on the radical for Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, where “metropolitanism” had been a fighting word throughout the twentieth century. The city of Pittsburgh was, and remains to this day, the hole in the doughnut of greater Pittsburgh. The city had a population then of about half a million, while the surrounding 129 municipalities ranged from fifty to fifty thousand, totaling close to another million and a half. Attempts to create a governmental unit encompassing the city and the county had failed, with smaller communities’ fears of being “swallowed up” being most vocally expressed by those local officials concerned for their sinecures or satrapies.

Bob Doyle and I garnered the endorsements of the two major newspapers, and I got the blessing of the Americans for Democratic Action, the only Republican to be favored by this liberal activist group. But citizen interest in the race was not particularly great. On election day, I won the minority delegate spot in our district by a minuscule 215 votes.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL Convention opened in December 1967 in Harrisburg. My first contribution was a critique of the draft rules of procedure for the convention; the final rules took most of my suggestions into account. The degree to which such “technicalities” can affect substantive outcomes often goes unrecognized. In this case, alphabetical seating intermixing Republican and Democratic delegates, rather than the usual caucus format, was crucial to the convention’s ultimate success.

I also introduced the first proposed amendment to the constitution: the Pennsylvania Bar Association’s judicial reform plan, upon which I had worked for the last five years. The amendment provided for merit selection of judges and for replacement of the minor judiciary with community courts presided over by professional judges.

Attacks on the proposal focused primarily on the merit selection provisions. After considerable debate, the forty-two-member Judiciary Committee reported out an amended version by a 22–16 vote, the bare minimum required. This version applied merit selection to the appellate courts and established a local option for all others. Unfortunately, the convention decided to require a citizen referendum in 1969 on even this watered-down proposal. In the absence of voter approval, the worst result imaginable would be forthcoming as “reform”—continued partisan election of all judges followed by “yes–no” retention elections at regular intervals.

The minor judiciary was a tougher nut to crack. The committee’s eventual proposal, adopted again by the bare minimum of votes, was to retain the existing system, except in Philadelphia, but to allow local voters to replace it with community courts. As reported in the *Post-Gazette*, my response was emphatic: “We’re not giving up. We’ll fight on the convention floor to get rid of the justices of the peace. This is not the end.” Ginny reported to me that, when she read that account to the boys at breakfast, they responded, “Way to go, Dad!” However, the convention ultimately approved the committee’s watered-down proposal.

Before final action was taken on the judiciary article, the Philadelphia Republican delegation hosted a dinner at which I first met the fabled Billy Meehan, one of the last of the big-city Republican bosses. The dinner was

clearly meant to build support for an amendment that would add ten judges to the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, all to be appointed by the governor, presumably from a list presented by Meehan. During floor debate, however, I characterized the amendment as “a gross usurpation of the legislative process,” and it was voted down. This did not endear me to the Philadelphia Republican organization, as I was to be reminded years later.

The convention passed a strong local-government proposal providing for home rule, merger and consolidation and more efficient procedures. And fellow delegate K. Leroy Irvis and I cosponsored a constitutional provision mandating the establishment of a public defender’s office in every county.

The convention closed on schedule on February 28, 1968, and I embarked on a vigorous speaking tour to solicit voter support for our proposals. Strong and articulate opposition developed, but the electorate approved all of the amendments that May. (I was chosen the Republican committeeman for the first district of the fourteenth ward in the same election.) Unfortunately, the next year the watered-down judicial merit selection plan was defeated in its separate referendum, and judicial selection in Pennsylvania remained in the Dark Ages.

In my view, Ray Shafer has never received enough credit for making constitutional reform a priority, postponing budgetary and tax measures for later consideration. The resolution of these questions eventually cost him dearly in public support.

SHORTLY AFTER the convention, H. J. (Jack) Heinz II and Joseph Hughes of the Mellon interests asked me to participate in New York governor Nelson Rockefeller’s campaign for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination. Almost immediately, however, Rockefeller announced that he was not going to run. Within ten days, after a sound showing by maverick antiwar senator Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary, President Johnson made the dramatic announcement that he would not run either. And Senator Robert Kennedy entered the race.

Within less than a week, on April 4, came the devastating news of the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., the nation’s most prominent black civil rights leader. The assassination set off civil disturbances around the country, and soon we could see palls of smoke rising from the Hill District, Pittsburgh’s largest African American community. The National Guard was dispatched. The year before, because of my activities in support of providing legal counsel for indigent persons, I had

accepted an invitation to join the board of directors of the local American Civil Liberties Union chapter. Thus, I received a call to join other ACLU lawyers at the downtown police station to assist those being arrested. Outraged myself at the King assassination, I spent the night providing basic legal advice to a stream of black arrestees, principally very frightened and very agitated young men.

Later my civil rights activities brought me another unconventional “client.” A sizable demonstration was mounted to protest the lack of jobs for black construction workers. Among those arrested was Nate “Available” Smith (so named during his previous prizefighting career), head of Operation DIG, a group working to increase minority employment. His lawyer, Dan Berger, a prominent liberal Democrat and fellow ACLU board member, recommended that he have a Republican counsel as well and suggested me. I appeared with Dan, the charges against Nate were dismissed (they no doubt lacked any substance anyway) and I had a friend for life in Nate, a charming rogue with an infinite capacity for hustle. By year-end, my representation of Nate and my work with the ACLU, the Neighborhood Legal Services Association and the bar association’s Public Service Committee had often put me at odds with District Attorney Duggan’s hard-line “law and order” office.

One more horrendous event was yet to chill our nation. Ginny and I awoke the morning of June 5 to learn, via our bedside radio, that Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. I literally buried my head in my pillow in disbelief and horror. Our nation seemed to be losing its bearings, careening from one violent act to another. What could we do to restore its center of gravity?

The opportunity to throw myself into a frenzy of activity was at hand. Early in May, Governor Rockefeller had reentered the presidential race. His team had recruited me as their western Pennsylvania chairman, and we began immediately to gear up. Money, for once, was literally no object, and all of the state Republican leaders were in the governor’s camp. Locally, the Hillman forces leaned toward Rockefeller, but those headed by Duggan were committed to former vice president Richard Nixon.

The Rockefeller candidacy foundered when the last-minute entry of California governor Ronald Reagan split the anti-Nixon vote. In the fall, I joined the Nixon effort. A highlight for me was being joined by John Thornburgh, now eleven, at 4:30 A.M. on election day to put a door hanger upon every doorknob in our neighborhood.

Nixon had learned important lessons from Goldwater’s disastrous 1964

campaign. No longer were shrill and simplistic attacks on the “radical” opposition the centerpiece of the Republican message. Racist and jingoistic appeals, not being part of the candidate’s makeup, were shelved, fortunately seldom to reappear in GOP campaigns. The Democrats proved to be their own worst enemy; the turmoil within the party reached a crescendo during its convention in Chicago, which President Johnson could not even attend. Nonetheless, with Alabama governor George Wallace siphoning off some of the far right votes, Nixon’s victory over Hubert Humphrey, LBJ’s vice president, was a narrow one. We celebrated it with somewhat muted enthusiasm. The cataclysmic events of 1968 were ominous harbingers of ongoing racial, ideological and generational conflicts.

DURING ALL THIS political activity, our family reached a number of important milestones as well. Peter’s regimen changed dramatically when the staff at the Home for Crippled Children told us they had done all they could for him and it was time for him to move on. They were absolutely correct, but Ginny and I had come to depend so much on them that the news came as quite a shock. We had always kept in mind the possibility that Peter might someday have to be institutionalized, but as time went on, we became more and more determined to keep him within the family that he had enriched beyond description and to which he meant so much.

His traumatic entry into the public school system helped to galvanize Ginny into a lifetime of advocacy for persons with disabilities. When she went to visit Peter’s proposed new surroundings at Larimer School in East Liberty, she was ushered into a dark, dank basement classroom near the furnace. A group of students, aged six to twelve, were occupied in making pot holders. When Ginny confronted the principal, she was coolly told, “These kids don’t care.” Furious, she immediately set about to remedy the burden of second-class citizenship imposed on children and adults with mental retardation in our community. Her involvement with the Allegheny County Chapter of the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (now ACHIEVA) eventually led her to its presidency and to leadership in statewide and national efforts to improve care for these and other persons with disabilities.

Ginny and I, Presbyterian and Episcopalian, respectively, had searched for a site to worship where we were both comfortable and finally settled on a local Presbyterian church. Ginny became active in an attempt, opposed by conservative elements, to make our church more relevant to the community and more socially responsible. One of her efforts was to include Peter

in our family's worship. As she noted, upon Bill's arrival, many in the congregation asked us, "When are we going to see that beautiful new baby of yours in the nursery?" But no one asked about Peter, generally at home on Sunday mornings with a sitter.

Ginny secured the blessing of the church to open a Sunday school class for mentally retarded children, found the space and a volunteer teacher with a special education background, and advertised the availability of the class. But on opening day, Peter was the only one who showed up. This was a heartbreaker for Ginny. Did families with children with mental retardation not believe that the church cared about them? Were they so accustomed to being excluded that they couldn't even imagine a welcoming church? These questions and the general absence of people with disabilities from worship services were to haunt her for years and foreshadowed her very important work to make all houses of worship more welcoming.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, my political preoccupations had not advanced my law firm career. The firm had continued to pay me an associate's salary during my congressional campaign and my stint at the Constitutional Convention, although I was devoting 100 percent of my time to non-firm matters. Of course, I was immensely grateful for their support. Even when I was in the office, however, my productivity was low, and my ability to carry my share of the load seemed actually to be declining. While several of my contemporaries and, by this time, my juniors, had become partners, my own efforts did not warrant such recognition, and I knew it. This situation clearly could not continue indefinitely. By 1968, I had resumed a rather full schedule at the firm, but as the year drew to a close, I was obliged to take stock of my prospects.

I was seriously considering running for mayor of Pittsburgh in 1969—perhaps even on a "fusion" ticket—and felt much more secure than I had four years earlier about challenging Mayor Barr. I had already begun a round of radio and television appearances to discuss the city's problems. As luck would have it, I was presented with a major issue at year-end, when the mayor attempted to secure a \$2,500 pay raise from the City Council. My examination of the law indicated that such a raise was clearly illegal. The legislature in 1965 had stipulated that the mayor's salary "shall not be increased or diminished during the term for which he shall have been elected." I held a widely covered press conference to attack the raise; the mayor and his lawyer, the city solicitor, were obliged to agree with me and to back down.

This episode projected me into the public view, but I needed a broader theme upon which to build a true reform campaign. This I found in the issue of home rule. The new constitutional amendments authorized all local government units to adopt home rule charters, which would enable the people to govern themselves free of interference from Harrisburg. Home rule also offered the opportunity to streamline government, reducing the number of local government units and rationalizing the often duplicative and overlapping provision of municipal services. Entrenched political interests, predictably, were not at all enthusiastic about such changes.

Over the 1968 Christmas holidays, I drafted a paper entitled “Blue Print for Modern Government: A Home Rule Charter for Pittsburgh.” This package of recommendations—some of which, years later, were actually included in the Pittsburgh charter—received a good deal of publicity and editorial approval. By this time media commentary regularly referred to me as “a potential Republican candidate for mayor,” and I began a series of discussions with party leaders and participants in our 1966 congressional effort to sketch some plans for the race.

But my potential candidacy was derailed by an unexpected February phone call from Elsie Hillman, by then the Republican county chairwoman. Speaking for Senators Scott and Schweiker, she inquired about my interest in being appointed by President Nixon as United States attorney for western Pennsylvania.