

Sensitivity training: Lessons from Senator Paul Simon

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

Former Illinois Senator Paul Simon, who died last December, was the son of a Lutheran missionary and an avowed liberal Democrat. I served as campaign manager for Simon's 1984 primary race for the Senate, and directed a staff that was young, aggressive and often frustrated at Simon's determined grip on his liberal ideals.

In that campaign, Simon faced formidable opposition from three opponents: an African-American state official and two Chicago area politicians, one of whom was backed by the party establishment. Paul was the liberal in the race, and after a few weeks, it became clear that we needed to broaden his liberal base.

Press secretary Forest Claypool, who later served as chief of staff to the mayor of Chicago and is now a Cook County commissioner, and field director David Wilhelm, who would later manage Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign and chair the Democratic National Committee, convinced me that we needed a press conference in which we would unveil Paul as a crime fighter. It was a blatant appeal for conservative suburban voters.

When the candidate arrived to face the press, we handed him a few paragraphs deploring lawlessness and promising Senate action against crime. I was not as young nor as aggressive as other staff members. Having known Paul for many years, I was not optimistic about the outcome of the venture.

The first question was from a grizzled reporter who knew that liberals like solutions. So, he asked, how you gonna do it? Simon's response evoked a collective grimace from the staff. Forgetting about calls for more police on the streets and harsher prison terms, Simon lectured the media on the need to fight crime by spending more money on education. He was right, of course, because ignorance and poverty breed crime. But the news out of that press conference was not about crime but about Simon, the big spender.

Simon survived that outing. He won the Democratic primary. He went on to win the general election and served with distinction for 12 years in the Senate. I was reminded of Paul Simon's belief in the power of education when I read how Vice President Dick Cheney had attacked Democratic candidate John Kerry for saying Kerry would be "sensitive" in fighting the war on terror. You can't be sensitive, the vice president insisted, when you fight terror.

This translates, in our current political parlance, to the charge that Kerry is "soft" on terror, a charge that he's had little time to repudiate since he's been too busy defending his Vietnam war record from simplistic false attacks. Reducing any political debate to the sound-bite level of good versus bad leaves little room for understanding ambiguity or for listening to the opinions of others. Supporting education when the public fears crime, along with being "sensitive" to terror—these are not popular topics for a frightened populace.

I had many conversations over the years with Paul Simon, and he never deviated from his conviction that education is not a "soft" issue, but the pathway to understanding. One of Simon's favorite "what ifs" was to say to audiences, "What if Leonid Brezhnev had been an exchange student as a young man in the U.S.? There would be no cold war." Of course, as a former exchange student, Brezhnev might never have ascended to the leadership of the Soviet Union. But Simon's optimism had little room for such logical cynicism. The staff could never persuade him to drop that "what if" story. And maybe we were wrong. Simon had instincts about communication that the rest of us may have missed.

Simon would have responded eagerly to recent comments from Major General Robert Scales, author of the official account of the U.S. Army's role in the first Gulf war and a former commandant of the Army War College. Stephen J. Hedges wrote recently in the *Chicago Tribune* that Scales "argues that the military is spending billions on weapons but just a pittance on educating its officers and soldiers, especially on the foreign culture and languages they encounter in places like Iraq and Afghanistan." Scales adds that "cultural isolation in Iraq created a tragic barrier, separating Iraqis of goodwill from the inherent goodness that Americans demonstrated so effectively in places like Korea, Japan and Germany."

Without sensitivity to others, we leave ourselves locked into a national self-centeredness that blocks us from hearing any but our own voices. We defeat ourselves with our inability to hear how others feel. Juan Cole, a professor at the

University of Michigan, pointed recently to the damage caused by this failure to be open to others:

The Muslim world was largely sympathetic to the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks. Iranians held candlelight vigils, and governments and newspapers condemned terrorism. Bush's unprovoked attack on Iraq, however, turned people against the U.S. The brutal, selfish, exploitative occupation, the vicious siege of Fallujah, the tank battles in front of the shrine of Ali (a vicar of the Prophet), Abu Ghraib, and other public relations disasters have done their work.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, George Semaan, editor of the Arab newspaper *Al Hayat*, wrote that the U.S. will not be able to uproot terrorism "unless it changes its perspective on how it builds its interests and how it defends them, by building a network of relationships that takes into consideration the interest of others."

Sounds a lot like Paul Simon to me. And sensitive too.