

INSIDE: The New York Video Festival

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1995

\$3.75 US \$5.00 CAN

FILMS & VIDEO

THE INDEPENDENT

M O N T H L Y

Semper Fi

Documenting the
\$18 Million Campaign
That Couldn't



A publication of the Foundation for Independent Video and Film

Another year passed. The next time they saw each other, Cutler was trying to produce a project on the three-way Presidential race. "At that point, R.J. was planning to make three films. He was talking to me about possibly doing one, he was talking to Joe Berlinger and [Bruce] Sinofsky, and he was talking to [Chris Hegedus and D.A.] Pennebaker. And it became the one film...about the War Room."

Van Taylor mentioned his idea for the North documentary. "At which time, it was just fantasy," he recalls. "Then you flash forward to 1993, when, in the interim, the *New York Times* had done several real stories, and I, who had had this idea for two years already, was kicking myself for not having gotten anywhere on access."

Midway through 1993, Cutler and Van Taylor crossed paths again, this time at their tenth college reunion. *The War Room* was finished and awaiting release. Cutler asked about the North film. "I said, 'I'm doing so much, I let that fall by the wayside,'" Van Taylor recalls, "and right now, I bet it's too late.' He said, 'Come on, it's not too late.' So I said, 'Well, look. If you'll do it with me, I'll do it.' And that's when we really started in earnest," he says. "And of course we were six to nine months ahead of anybody, even though I had this idea so long I thought I'd missed the

from the North camp was, 'We don't want to make a film that glorifies the staff.' To which we agreed; this is a different film. It's not about the staff; it's about North and his relationship to the media, and his relationship to his followers, etcetera. Which of course played right into our argument that they have to keep giving us more and more access to him."

The filmmakers used two key arguments to get their foot in the door. One was that no one would see the footage before the election, therefore the film could not affect the vote. The second was that the candidates would have limited right of review. Like *The War Room*, says Cutler, "We explained to the subjects that we considered them a part of the process, that on an important level, it's a collaboration.... Our objective was not to catch them with their pants down, making mistakes, but to capture as honestly as possible who they are. We told them, truthfully, that when we're in the process of making the film, probably at a rough cut point, we will show them the material of them and ask for their response to it. And then we'll take it from there."

With that, the door opened—very gradually. By August, Cutler was saying, "It's not as though we're sitting in on top-level secret meetings.... The control that they exercise is the same control that George [Stephanopoulos] and James [Carville] exercised, which has to do with when they chose to let us shoot." But gradually, the producers slipped their feet in deeper and deeper, until finally they were on the inside of closed-door strategy sessions. By October, Van Taylor could boast, "We've gotten all the access we want from everybody at this moment."

WE HAVE TO BREAK FOR SOME CRASS COMMERCIAL MESSAGES," barks Liddy. As the telephone lines silently flash during the break, he and North chat about their mutual loathing of National Public Radio and Liddy's media stats. Despite North's animosity towards the press, the retired marine knows the turf. "How are your Arbitron ratings?" North asks. "And did you get to NAB this year?"

"Yeah, we did pretty well. I think we'll pick up several more stations," says Liddy, whose program blankets the state of Virginia and is carried by 199 stations nationally.

"That's great," says North. "This kind of radio is really the answer to the liberal media."

"THE LIBERAL MEDIA" IS SOMETHING NORTH SUPPORTERS HEAR A LOT about. On the campaign trail, he rarely lets an opportunity pass without lobbing a grenade at "the Washington Compost," "New York Crimes," or "Readers' Disgust". He fundraises using his "victimization" by the press. He disparages critical editorials as examples of "liberal media bias." In the warm-up film before his primary acceptance speech, he includes Sam Donaldson and Dan Rather among his foes, alongside Clinton, Robb, Jesse Jackson, and Jane Fonda.

But North's day-to-day relationship with the media is far more nuanced than his rhetoric would lead one to believe.

"The press is obviously a critical player in this campaign," says Cutler. "First of all, [North] runs against the media. Yet at the same time, he is very dependent on the media for his presentation to the public—of his

rhetoric, his vision, his nine-point crime plan, his four-point over-all plan. As we know from the Iran-contra hearings, he is a bit of a master at his utilization of television."

Early on in the shooting of *Semper Fi*, it became clear that this relationship would be a central theme. At the same time, one reporter stood out in terms of his seniority, his newspaper, and his willingness to spar with North. This was Donald L. Baker, a 24-year veteran of the *Washington Post*, who was "in some ways the personification of the Liberal Media, which North is constantly bashing and yet on whom he totally relies," says Van Taylor. Baker is "a bit of central casting," in Cutler's view. "He's brilliant, amusing, an engaging character, and he fulfills the need of a filmmaker for a character who's passionate about what he does and is doing it extremely well in high-stakes circumstances."

Furthermore, Baker's newspaper is a favorite target of North. "One of the stories he likes to tell," Baker relates, "is that every morning when he gets up, he reads the Bible and the *Washington Post*—so that he can get both sides."

But in Baker's experience, North's bark is worse than his bite with the press. His rhetoric "doesn't translate into a different relationship between the candidate, the staff, and the media," says the 61-year-old reporter, who covers Virginia's state politics from his base in Richmond. "They're professionals. We get along fine. It's pretty much part of his shtick. It's an act."

That might surprise his supporters. So might the amount of joking, schmoozing, and bargaining that goes on between North and his presumed media foes in *Semper Fi*. So might any number of scenes, like the one with the missing press van, which brought North's caravan to a grinding halt while five staffers stood on the highway with cellular phones and walkie-talkies, frantically try to locate them—the Liberal Media. Or

North recalling how he phoned Baker after a tough debate to say how much he likes sparring with him. Or North and Baker at dinner, casually arguing about the press' negativity. Or Baker explaining how, far from conspiring to defeat North, the press will "vote the story" and "Oliver North is by far the best story out there."

This dynamic between North and the press fascinates the filmmakers. "The contradiction of bashing each other, then going out and having a beer afterwards is quite often there [in other campaigns], but the contrasts are starker," says Van Taylor. "That's why Don Baker wants to be a part of this movie. He wants to tell that story. It's a story that has been apparent to him and any other self-aware political journalist for a long time. And here it is, writ large."

LIDDY PULLS A FAX FROM A STACK OF LISTENERS' QUESTIONS. HE'S BEEN saving this one, and reads it with a devilish grin: "Mr. North, if you were elected President, would you offer G. Gordon Liddy a pardon?"

The two erupt in hoots of laughter, then segue into a series of allusions to Bill Clinton soon needing such a pardon. The filmmakers don't know it yet, but North is hoping to drop a bombshell related to this later that afternoon.

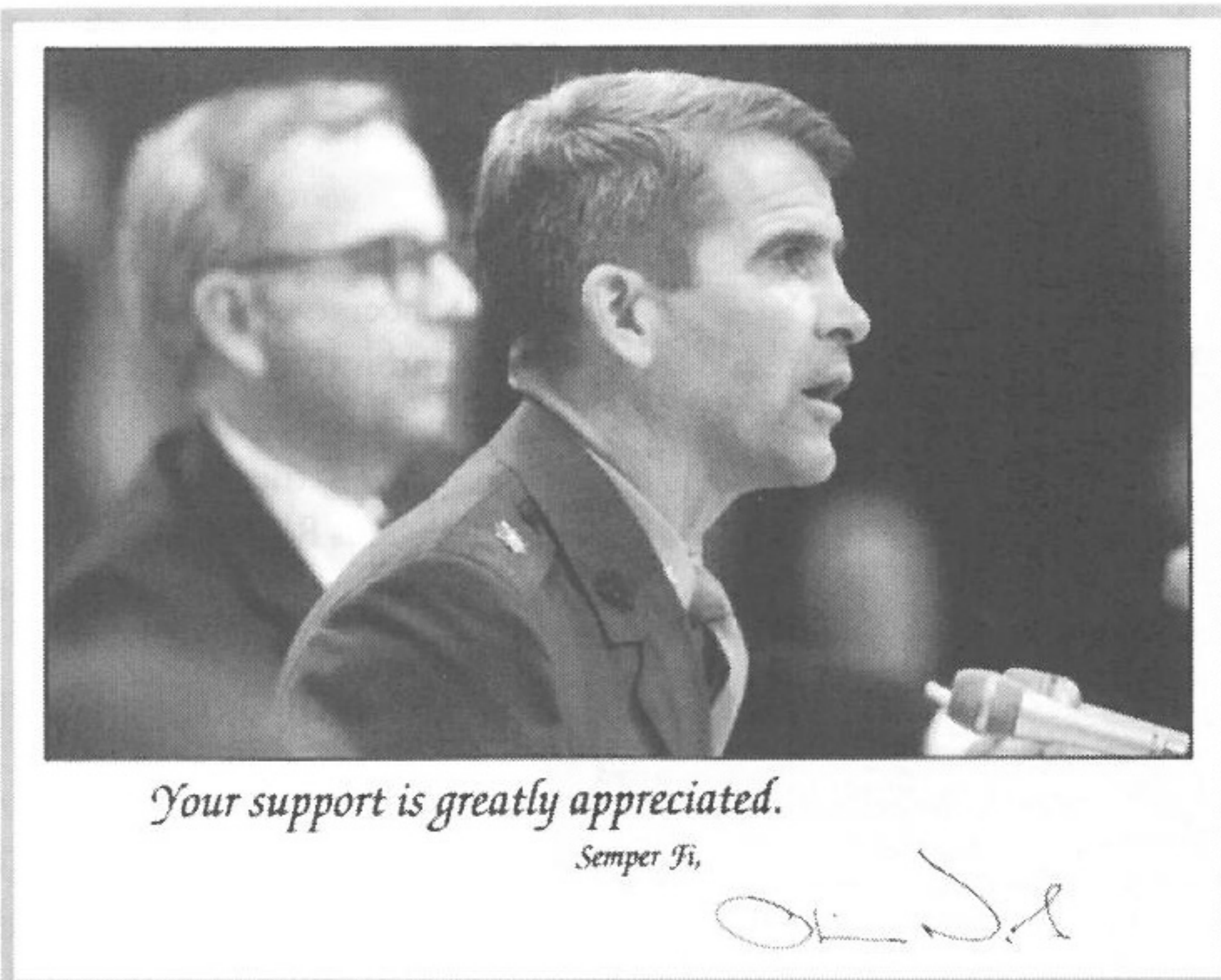
Reporter Mike Allen from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the only campaign reporter attending the radio show, alerts the film crew to a press conference North has scheduled immediately afterwards.

Cutler and Van Taylor had planned to stick around for a short interview with Liddy, then drop by North's headquarters to pick up a tape of his political ads, which media consultant Mike Murphy would later review with them. Their hidden agenda was to get invited inside headquarters—one of the only places they hadn't been able to penetrate.

All those plans are dropped with news of the press conference. Moments later, Van Taylor and Doob are running alongside Allen's car, equipment ahoist. They jump in as it pulls out of the parking lot, with Cutler close behind.

WHEN YOU'VE GOT A TIGER BY THE TAIL, YOU RUN WITH IT, WHEREVER IT goes. Flexibility is what enabled the *Semper Fi* crew to snag and hang on to their catch: flexibility, persistence, and a little bit of luck.

Serendipity played a part when they stumbled on to a direct mail factory near one of the campaign stops, which happened to be used by North, Newt Gingrich, and other conservatives. Not only that, it was run by Jerry Falwell's brother-in-law. "And all of a sudden," says Cutler, "we have this 45-minute tour of the heart and soul of Ollie's mass mailing operation."



Your support is greatly appreciated.

Semper Fi

Oliver North

Vintage North (with attorney Brandon "potted plant" Sullivan), in a photo mass-mailed along with a plea for campaign contributions. The candidate and his advisors were banking on Virginians to vote for him because of Iran-contra, not despite it.

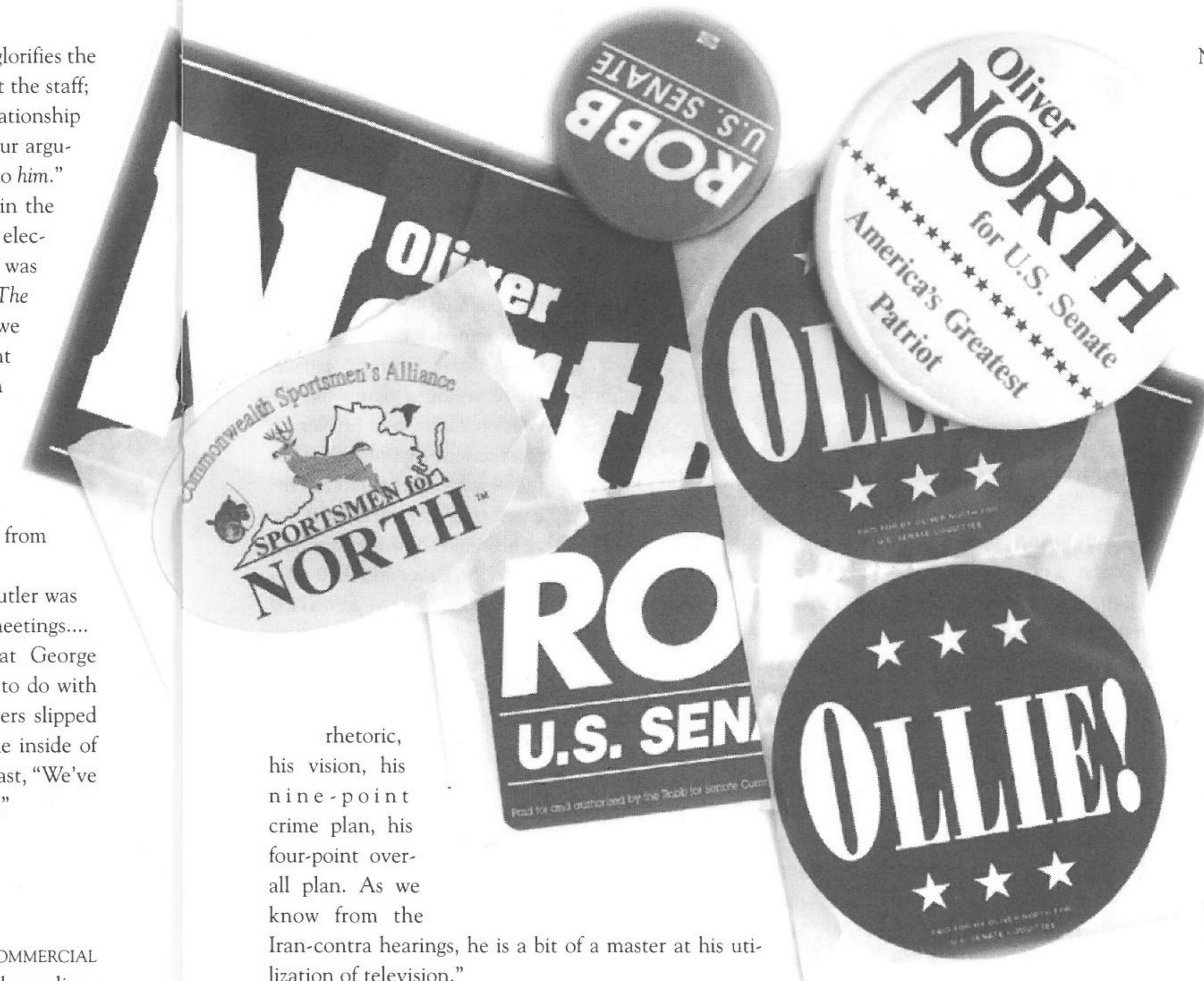
Courtesy Oliver North

boat."

Getting access to North was neither easy nor immediate. "We were very up-front," says Van Taylor. "Our first letter said, 'We are liberals, but....' We explained we're not in this to nail Ollie...but we wanted to understand why \$9 million in \$30 checks was raised" for North's candidacy so early in the game. (North ultimately spent twice that amount, versus Robb's \$5 million.)

Their first meeting with North's handlers was in October—the weekend *The War Room* opened. "We took a gamble," Van Taylor admits, "because it could swing one of two ways. One is: 'These guys are obviously God-damned liberals. Let's not let them anywhere near us.' Or it could be, 'Hey, I'd like to be the star of that movie.'"

The War Room ended up working both for and against them. Initially the response was negative. "In some ways, we had to distinguish ourselves from *The War Room*," explains Van Taylor, "because one of the responses



It also helped salvage what began as a disastrous day: A travel agent's screw-up, compounded by a traffic jam, caused them to completely miss Robb and North at a Labor Day parade and campaign kick-off. They ran into Murphy, who was shooting footage for a North ad, tried to latch onto him, but he essentially blew them off. With eight hours to kill until the next event, the discouraged team shuffled over to a local barbecue pit. It

appeared closed. "Just our luck," they thought, until taking a second look. Not only was it open, but there was Murphy, eating lunch.

They scored. "We sat down and had lunch with him, and he told us incredible stories," recalls Van Taylor of Murphy's first-hand accounts of the Bush '88 campaign and Christy Todd Whitman's run for Governor of New Jersey. "So we seized the opportunity and hopped into Murphy's car afterwards, and had a very good car interview/conversation with him."

Murphy admitted he had initially been lined up against them. "He revealed that he was one of the big guys many moons ago saying 'Pull the plug on these documentary guys,'" Van Taylor recalls. "It was clear from the way he was telling it that we had made a major breakthrough with him, which translated into a pretty important breakthrough with the campaign."

This unexpected encounter began paying off the very next night, at one of the official, four-way debates between candidates North, Robb, L. Douglas Wilder, and J. Marshall Coleman. The film crew was treated essentially as insiders, allowed backstage to film Merritt, Murphy, and Mark Goodin, North's chief strategist who later became a central figure in their shoots, as they watched and critiqued the televised proceedings.

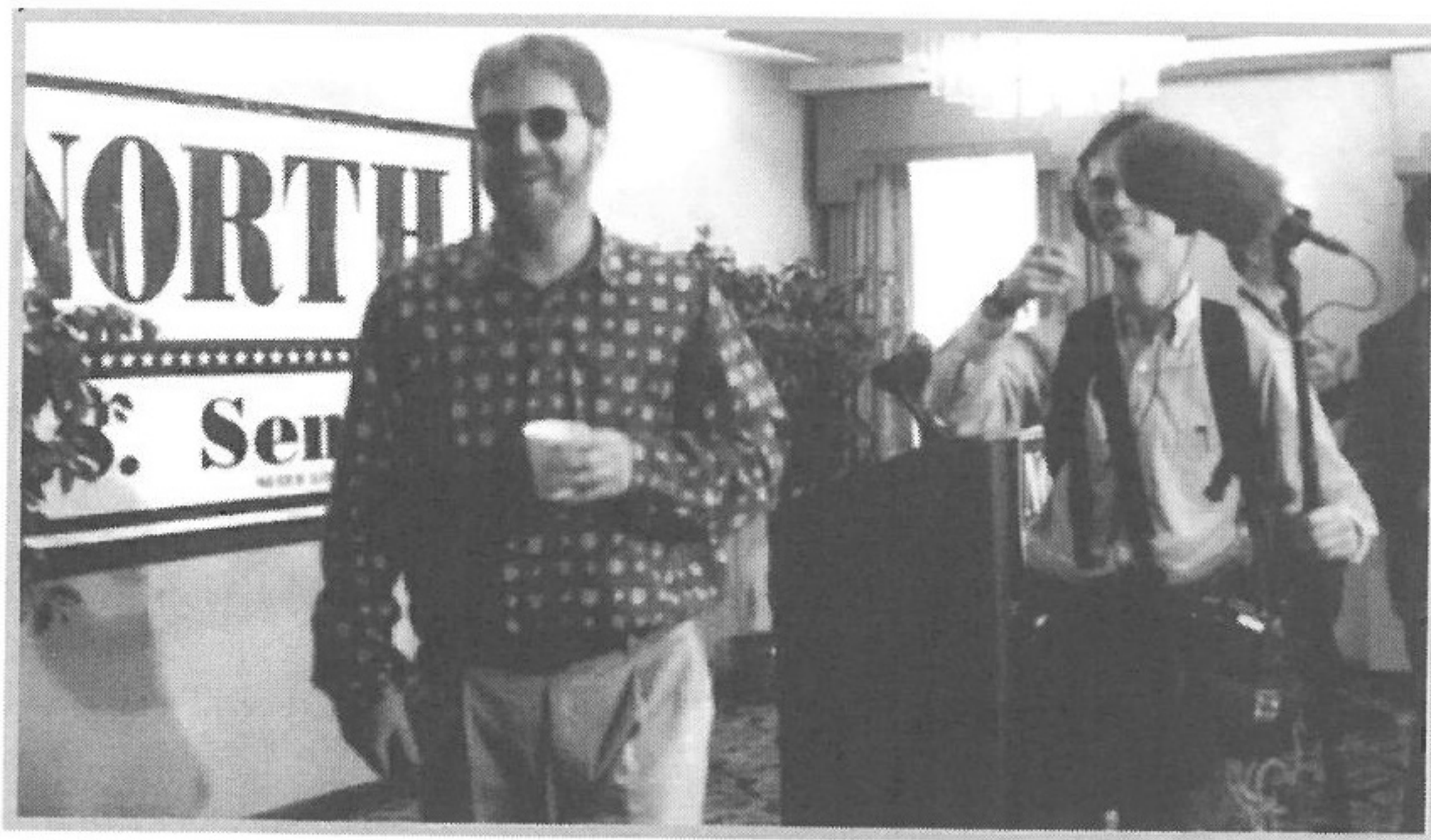
A shift in attitude was taking place among the candidates and their staffs as a sense of investment in the film was gradually crowding out whatever suspicions or doubts were previously felt. North was heard referring to the filmmakers as "my crew." His willingness to allow the documentary team ever closer owed to several factors, in Don Baker's view. The film "appeals to North's ego," the reporter commented during the campaign's final weeks. "And I suspect he thinks he'll come off as a softer kind of guy. Assuming he wins, he'll want to enlarge his reach beyond a kind of fanatical core of supporters, and he sees this [film] as an implement of that."

Meanwhile, North's men started suggesting where the wireless mike should go and what their film might be. Murphy, for instance, argued that a film about "pointed-headed fundamentalists for North" would be less interesting than one that looks at North's appeal to people like him: a Georgetown graduate, Beltway insider, communications consultant—part of the intellectual elite, in fact.

Increased access, the filmmakers were finding, was a double-edged sword. In some ways, control was exercised not by keeping them out, but by inviting them in, closer and closer.

Which leads one to ask: Were they being used? Cutler admits it's a question they've been thrashing out since day one. So how do they respond?

"We say, 'Gosh, are we?' And we look at what we're doing, and we



R.J. Cutler and David Van Taylor at North's press conference in Alexandria, VA, on October 20, 1994. Photo: Patricia Thomson

have long talks," Cutler says. "Look, the movie is going to be a reflection of the experience we've had over the course of the year. We're seeing a lot of other things: The campaign of Lt. Col. Oliver North for the Senate [and] the campaign of his opponents. We're seeing an environment of an electrified, conservative voting populace. We're seeing a figure like G. Gordon Liddy, one of North's most ardent supporters, utilize the very media that North criticizes to generate support for

him throughout the state of Virginia, where his radio show is enormously popular. We're seeing the *Washington Post* and Don Baker and their relationship to the campaign. So ultimately I don't worry that we're making a propaganda piece for North, on any level."

As Van Taylor explains it, "I think Oliver North will probably look at the film and say, 'This is a fair and a good representation of me, and I think it will show me off well to my followers or potential followers.' And I think people who are opponents of Oliver North will say, 'This is a fair and a good representation of Oliver North, and it demonstrates all of his flaws and contradictions that he represents for our culture.'"

MAINTAINING A STANCE OF NEUTRALITY AND CREDIBILITY WITH THEIR SUBJECTS is one reason why the filmmakers never took a partisan route when fundraising. They didn't see *Semper Fi* as a way to "get" North and never pitched it that way. Instead, their efforts to finance their film—projected to run somewhere under \$600,000—proceeded just like any other documentary. Meaning it's been a long, hard road. North's defeat—while blessedly good for many reasons—won't make this process any easier.

Their credits on *The War Room* and *Dream Deceivers* opened doors, but not checkbooks. A few weeks before election day, the *Semper Fi* war chest was empty, though there were some live prospects. They'd gotten this far through the usual no-budget production route: travel and equipment expenses paid out of pocket; no salaries; partially deferred fees for cameramen Nick Doob and Doug Block and the trailer's editor; plus a donation of Hi8 and Beta tape stock from Sony.

"We're putting together the necessary pieces," Cutler said during the summer, "and the ones we don't have to pay for, we don't, and the ones we do, we do. The credit cards are maxed out. Diner's Club remains convinced that the check is on its way. Until they wise up, we'll be able to cover some costs. But isn't it like that for everybody?" He pauses. "I hope it [isn't], and somebody lets us in on the secret."

Gains were being made on several fronts, however. Cutler managed to snag a no-interest loan of \$50,000 from a "concerned wealthy industrialist." But the paperwork and delivery schedule were dragging on; three weeks before the election, the check was still rumored to be in the mail.

There was also a deal being negotiated with ABC's *Prime Time Live*. The filmmakers balked at allowing the network to show their unedited footage on election night—ABC's initial goal. They ultimately negotiated a \$10,000 agreement to broadcast an excerpt when the film is done.

Most significantly, the filmmakers were also hammering out a presale agreement with Universal Pictures—a process that took over four months, dramatically concluding on election night. The deal began with

a cold call. In between shoots, the filmmakers were sending out feelers in every direction, meeting with Jonathan Demme, *sex, lies, videotape* producer Nick Wexler, and others. Cutler also sent a letter to Norman Lear, which began, "Help!"

He did. Lear brought the project to the attention of Tom Pollock, chair of MCA/Universal Motion Picture Group, who became interested, along with Zanne Devine and Russell Schwartz of Universal subsidiary Gramercy Pictures. (The studio's bean-counters, however, were less than enthusiastic about taking on a documentary—an unprecedented move for the company.) The advance the studio initially offered was in the low-to mid-six-figure range for North American rights—very enticing to Cutler and Van Taylor, who had tapped out their personal savings. But it was a risky proposition, since Universal was not willing to commit to theatrical prior to the film's completion and the universe of distributors who handle only theatrical is relatively small.

"Theatrical distribution for independent documentaries is not a big bread-winning proposition by itself. The reason most people do it," Van Taylor explains, "is because they get a bunch of rights bundled with it, the theatrical raises the value of the other rights, and it all comes out in the wash."

"Our objective is to have the movie in theaters and to pay the bills," says Cutler. "We're willing to take a risk; we took a big risk with *The War Room*. Our advance on *The War Room* was not a large amount of money, but the distributors did a great job with it and as a result, the money came in. That's great. But the deal with Universal had to be structured in a way that the possibility for theatrical distribution realistically exists."

The final deal, closed in Virginia by conference call just as the election results were being reported and filmed, provides the filmmakers with an advance they are "very happy with," reports Cutler. It includes in-kind postproduction services, and, "It addresses everyone's concerns about theatrical release in a very flexible way that's allowing us to sleep easy at night," says Cutler. "This way, if everything works out, we'll definitely be able to achieve our original goals: having it exhibited in theaters and keeping the folks at Diners Club happy." Now with Universal signed on, they're in a good position to move ahead with additional fundraising, targeting foreign sales prospects and private investors.

A FEW DOZEN REPORTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE MILLING ABOUT ON THE fifth floor of the Hilton in Alexandria, Virginia, waiting for North to arrive at his press conference. Van Taylor and Doob slide among them, hovering near Kent Jenkins, a *Washington Post* reporter, and Mike Allen, who writes many of the campaign "color pieces" for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. The reporters seem fairly adept at ignoring the boom and camera a few feet away. But the rest of the press corps is watching, if only out of the corner of their eye.

Baker acknowledges that there has been a fair amount of curiosity among the press about the shoot. But more importantly for the filmmakers, "There's been a welcoming attitude," Baker says, adding, "They're good at it. They're as unobtrusive as you can be with those huge implements they carry around. And they are nonjudgmental about things. They don't talk about what they're doing; they don't express what their feelings are. They're going about it as cinematic journalists."

Baker confides, "I think one of the things that everybody has been surprised at is the access that David and R.J. have had with North."

That day the producers made even more headway after the press conference. North had scheduled it in order to assert publicly that President Clinton had made an illegal quid-pro-quo offer to Douglas Wilder, who had dropped out of the Senate race some weeks before. On the basis of one article in the arch-conservative *Washington Times*, North accused Clinton of offering Wilder a roving ambassadorship in Africa in exchange for throwing his support behind Robb. (Both the White House and Wilder flatly denied the report, and the story was soon overtaken by other news events, including North's silence about the drug-running on his contra supply planes and Nancy Reagan's attack on her husband's former employee.)

After fielding a few questions from the press, North was whisked down the hall to a conference room, closely followed by a pack of reporters. None were able to get into the conference room—but the *Semper Fi* crew did.

When they emerged, Cutler could barely contain himself. Though nothing exceptional had occurred with North, they had been invited to shoot in North headquarters, one of the few places they hadn't been able to penetrate. More than a tour, Merritt was going to let them attend a real strategy session, where, it ended up, they discussed truly sensitive issues, including how and when to play the race card and what to do about that troublesome report on drug-running in North's cargo planes.

All in all, it was a good day.

P OSTSCRIPT: November 9, election day: Back in January 1994, Van Taylor and Cutler named their operation Arpie Productions, which stands for R.P., or "rat's patootie." The reference is to a line *New York Times* reporter Maureen Dowd quoted when North declared his candidacy: "Mr. North believes that as far as Iran-contra goes, 'most people don't give a rat's patootie.'"

North was wrong; enough people did care to deny him the Senate seat. He was one of the only Republicans who didn't ride the tidal wave that crashed over and transformed the political landscape of Washington, D.C. Ultimately, pundits concluded that North's Achilles heel was his character. As Robb memorably summed it up on election eve: Oliver North is "a document-shredding, Constitution-trashing, Commander-in-Chief-bashing, Congress-thrashing, uniform-shaming, Ayatollah-loving, arms-dealing, criminal-protecting, résumé-enhancing, Noriega-coddling, Social Security-threatening, public school-denigrating, Swiss bank-law-breaking, letter-faking, self-serving, election-losing, snake oil salesman who can't tell the difference between the truth and a lie."

But this is surely not the last we'll hear of Oliver North, nor of his supporters: the military, the gun lobby, the right-to-lifers, the Religious Right, the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells, the Republican Presidential aspirants, like Robert Dole and Dan Quayle, and the rising tide of bitter, anti-government, conservative voters. When *Semper Fi* is released later this year, we'll see this potent mix all over again—both on the screen, and across the nation, as conservatives gear up for the '96 campaign.

Patricia Thomson is editor of *The Independent*.

