

## CHAPTER 8

### *Politics Ain't for Sissies*

I remember my father once saying that old age isn't for sissies. I have modified his phrase to apply it to politics. Although he died before I got into politics, I imagine he would have uttered a few sardonic comments as I trudged through the halls of the capitol some years later.

Politics definitely isn't for sissies. It frequently turns into a combat sport, with bruising tumbles. It also holds the possibility of reputation destruction. A thick skin is very helpful.

Before I go on, you might ask: Why do we even care about politics? It's a good question, what with the cynicism and stalemates, and the media focus on all the things that can't or don't happen for the good of the American people because the parties are fighting one another. So, here's why: because ultimately every single thing in our lives, our country, our world, comes down to some kind of politics.

Every rule, every regulation, every kind of payment from a unit of government to us, or one from us to it, depends on some man or woman in a position of power over the public purse. So it behooves all of us to be serious about it and be engaged in what is happening.

You can't just ignore the whole subject and hope politics go away. They won't. Merriam-Webster defines politics as "the art or science of government, the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy, or the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over a government."

The Urban Dictionary has a somewhat darker version when you look up politician—“A person who practices politics. ‘Politics’ is derived from ‘poly’ meaning ‘many’ and ‘tics’ meaning ‘blood-sucking parasites.’”

I wouldn’t go that far, but I have to say that I have seen aspects of people in elected office that I do not think reflect the best of our country. Facts matter, but I have seen instances where facts were ignored or shoved aside—all so one side could prevail. And prevailing meant getting their way, their tax, their privilege, their votes for reelection. This is a comment that applies to every political stripe possible—but I am not cynical enough to say everyone in politics is this way. So many people who sign up to serve and represent you and me are really great, honest, hard-working people who genuinely love the job and are public servants in the best sense of the phrase. And I am thankful for their time and work.

As a child, I was only somewhat aware of politics. My father, a Texan to the bone, was a conservative and a Republican. I was sitting in biology class at Vassar when we got the horrifying and terrible news that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. It was an absolute thunderbolt for all of us. Republican or Democrat labels didn’t matter. The President had been shot and it happened in Texas. The name of the city, Dallas, kept cropping up, as in: “It could only have happened in Dallas.” No other state or city would have let this happen. It isn’t true, of course, but it left a dark, indelible stain on Dallas that is there to this day. “Yes, JFK was shot right over there,” you hear people say. Tourists know exactly where it happened.

When I worked at the Dallas DA’s office, my parking spot for the first couple of years was just past the School Book Depository. The grassy knoll was on my right as I walked to the office. I couldn’t escape the memory. Nor can anyone today.

I worked for Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade as a prosecutor, and it was made clear we were all supposed to work for his reelection campaign. I walked door-to-door for the first time in my life. Dallas is hot in the summer, and we were starting the reelection effort in the hottest time of the year. I liked Mr. Wade enormously but wasn't happy that as a public employee I was pressured into working for him on his campaign. Nowadays this is not permitted, and there is much more scrutiny of the practice, which is good and right. But I did learn about going door-to-door, an experience that came in handy when it was time for me to do the same on my own behalf.

A year after my father's death, I was elected to the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Board of Directors. TSCRA was created in 1877 by a group of forty cattlemen who wanted to curb cattle theft and today has more than 15,000 members in Texas and the surrounding states. It's a strong and influential organization and a very important advocate for those in the cattle industry. I was one of only a couple of women to be so chosen. It was definitely a man's world at the time. But nonetheless, as a bona fide rancher, I was made very welcome. We ranchers talked about cattle, rain, water, grass, trucking, and a whole host of issues pertaining to our chosen livelihood.

Water was always a topic of much interest in the group and frequently the focus of potential legislation in the Texas legislature. The themes of conservation had direct meanings for us. We faced very different issues in the high desert than did ranchers in the piney woods of East Texas with its abundant water supplies; but access to and regulation of water were of real import to everyone—ranchers, farmers, and city dwellers, too. On our own ranch in West Texas, we always worried when the wind died, because when the windmill blades didn't turn, the water didn't get pumped, and we would then have to be careful about our water use. The presence or absence of wind was a major

issue, unless you had another form of energy to lift water from the ground. When you spend a fair amount of time as a kid listening to water drip into a metal tank, you get a wholly different appreciation of its importance.

*I think being an active and concerned citizen is something all of us should be—it's good for our own lives, but more importantly, it's great for our democracy.*

Because I was on the board of the Cattle Raisers, and because we had moved to Austin, the state capital, I was asked to testify before the Texas legislature on water issues. Proximity to the capitol didn't imply expertise, however. This was going to be entirely new for me. I was excited about learning something so different from what I had done previously, and which had the potential to get lawmakers to make changes that impacted the state's citizens. I had certainly grilled witnesses before in my legal career, but hadn't been on the receiving end of questions. I went to the Senate Natural Resource committee hearings. I learned the room number in which they were held, filled out the required witness card (they wanted to make certain you were truthful in your testimony, find out whom you were representing, and how to get in touch with you later). Then I waited for my turn to make comments to the committee and the nearly one hundred people in attendance. I continued to testify throughout the 1991 legislative session, which started in January and ended 140 days later. The session follows this same schedule every other year in Texas, so citizens and others have an opportunity to talk to lawmakers and participate fully in this legislative process. I had begun to figure out where things were in this law-making body and how things got done, but I certainly didn't envision myself as any kind of expert. I thought of myself as more of an

active and concerned citizen. To this last point, I think being an active and concerned citizen is something all of us should be—it's good for our own lives, but more importantly, it's great for our democracy.

When I was asked by the TSCRA to think about helping in the capitol, I didn't know where to start. I called around Austin, joined another association related to farming and ranching, and followed in their footsteps. I needed an adult guide, and I was lucky to get one, a man from the Texas Farm Bureau. And it certainly helped that he was even taller than I was so we could keep pace with each other.

The very first day I walked into the capitol with my so-called guide, at the beginning of the 1991 legislative session, I was just beginning to learn where things were. After figuring out where to park and which door to use, we ran into a very tall man who grabbed me and gave me a big smacking kiss on the cheek. He was a complete stranger.

I had just met Edmund Kuempel, the state representative from the Seguin area of Texas. He was a big guy, with a broad face and a very friendly smile. I was in a dress with heels and we stood eye to eye. Texans are friendly, but this was unusual, even for Texas. I later called him Kissing Kuempel and found out he invariably kissed every woman he met on the cheek.

I asked around about him, because of the kiss. It turned out he was a staunch supporter of property rights, involved in protecting natural resources, and was a well-liked and respected member of the Texas House of Representatives. He just had that very distinctive quirk. This was the '90s, after all. What an introduction to Austin politics! He was definitely unforgettable, and he became one of my greatest allies and friends during my time in the Texas House.

Those first few months in the state capitol were eye openers. People walked quickly from place to place, then sat quietly in rooms where committees met. I saw state senators treat visitors and witnesses with

great courtesy, as well as great disrespect. The political arena is filled with all kinds of people, as you might imagine. Some really care about what they are doing, knowing they were hired by the public to perform a task. Others seem to find the setting a great place to stroke their egos. Others just show up. The sausage gets made and the process is not always pretty.

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A few days before the end of the 1991 legislative session, which had just completed its every-ten-year redistricting process, I was sitting in the gallery above the senate chamber when a friend of mine suggested I should run for the legislature. A new seat had been created in Austin, where I lived, and would favor a Republican. He said very memorably, “It will be a piece of cake.” I thought, Okay, this sounds really interesting. I can participate more fully in this great process, listen to citizens, and propose laws I think will be helpful to citizens who want more access and understanding of their government. And I can advocate for ways to make government more responsive to the people of Texas. Great! And I am pretty fearless about new opportunities, right? Plus, I have a law degree, some work experience. Sure. I’ll do it. It will be a piece of cake, right?

Not so fast.

What drove me to even consider running for office was that for years I had thought that government ought to be open, transparent, and accountable. In the ranching business, money was tight, and if you didn’t have it, you didn’t buy that truck, replace those several miles of fence, or get that year’s dream object. But we depended on ourselves and were honest about our finances. To do anything else was to court disaster. But was the same true of our government?

Everyone should read Elmer Kelton's *The Time It Never Rained*. While it pertained to the drought of the fifties, he made the point that self-reliance and independence are worth more than nearly anything else. I think these qualities should apply to politicians as well. His book is about stoicism, endurance, optimism, not getting suckered, and not quitting. I liked it and wanted to be like the main character.

So why did I end up running for office? It wasn't just that someone told me it would be a piece of cake. The election process was certainly not. The primary was followed by a runoff, then a recount, then a lawsuit, and finally I won by two votes. But what did I want? Why do it?

I felt that things could be made better.

Obviously there were some real stars, people I admire today. But there were an unfortunate few whose power derived simply from longevity, and their lack of talent showed. I had been willing to fight for children as a prosecutor, and I said I would take that same energy and fight for Texans in District 47 in Austin.

First of all, I needed some real advice and help. I needed to run and win in the March Republican primary, and then I would be running against the Democratic candidate in the November general election. I was referred to a man named Bill Miller as a potential consultant. I went to meet him at his office on a Saturday in a downtown building. I could see his office with its door open at the end of the hall. Strangely, the ceiling literally appeared to have fallen in. The place looked pretty much of a mess. I wondered what on earth had gone on—and why someone had recommended this man to me as a consultant.

I walked in, introduced myself, and we shook hands. I had already sent him information about my background. He pointed to the ceiling and said, "I really need this consulting job." I must have looked shocked, because he started laughing uproariously, with a totally distinctive laugh—which made me laugh too, of course. I was to learn his

laugh was one of the unique traits of this really talented man. Even thinking about it now makes me smile.

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otherwise the process is too difficult.*

Bill guided me through the campaign process and sent me to a campaign school for a couple of days. I had to learn how to ask for money, which is not for everyone, but absolutely necessary if you are going to run for public office. I have since become very adept. He and I formed a great bond, and I thoroughly enjoyed working with him. Through Bill, I met Lisa Woods, who worked for him at the time, and who has become a lifelong friend.

I was naïve, of course, but when I went campaigning door-to-door, I truly believed I could deliver things that people either wanted or needed. You have to feel that you are on a mission; otherwise the process is too difficult. It helped that I liked meeting new people and was spurred on by the possibility I really could help them.

When walking door-to-door and visiting with potential voters, you need three things: a way to be memorable, campaign materials to hand out, and a short speech that conveys everything you need to say about yourself, your views, and your experience.

I needed to be distinctive. I was tall, but the voters wouldn't have known that without seeing me in person. I needed something else. This was going to be quite a race for a very desirable legislative seat. What could I do? I had been in a parade once and watched a congressman throw plastic pickles out into the crowd, much to their delight. His name was Jake Pickle and he represented the Austin area in the United States Congress for over thirty years. If you are from Austin, you have probably seen his name on several buildings, and there is



an elementary school in his name. The *eureka* moment arrived. The next business day I ordered a few thousand combs with my name on them. Combs handing out combs. I thought it was so clever. Over the years I have handed out probably 150,000 of these little treasures. Giving them to hair-challenged gentlemen was interesting, but they all seemed to have a great sense of humor about it!

*Well, the lady energized the hell out of my hair.  
Teased, backcombed, and sprayed, my hair  
gained me three inches in height.*

Every candidate had a push card to give to voters. It had a picture of the candidate, some relevant facts or position statements, and was meant to be immediately persuasive. You could also punch a small hole in it, attach a rubber band, and hang it on a door for voters in case they weren't home when we came by—or, if they were hiding in a back room of their house waiting for us to leave them in peace. Bill decided he wanted me to have my hair and makeup professionally done for the photo on the push card.

The appointed hair and makeup day arrived. I submitted to the makeover and when I was able to see what I looked like, I was stunned. I was wearing a blue summer dress, which I had been advised would make me look energetic.

Well, the lady energized the hell out of my hair. Teased, backcombed, and sprayed, my hair gained me three inches in height. The eyes next. Blue eye shadow to match the dress. Lip gloss. Not the usual Susan look . . . at all. But I was running for public office and needed to look friendly and approachable.

Going door-to-door and handing out combs isn't always fun, but it's really important in an election and it's a great way to find out what is on the minds of the citizens you aim to represent.

I needed help of the most basic kind, and there were women in the district who offered it. I was overwhelmed with their kindness and support. Sometimes they would come to my house, sit at my dining table, and address invitations, work on maps for going door to door, and work on postcards. They also came to my small campaign office and worked the phones. Many of them were donors to my campaign. It was wonderful to be embraced and supported by these women—women supporting other women. Most of these women were in their late forties and early fifties and some older, but they all felt it was important to be part of the process. I could never have paid for the incredibly wonderful free labor these women provided. The majority of them were members of the Texas Federation of Republican Women, a grassroots community interested in electing Republicans and always helpful to women.

Interestingly, when I first ran for office, I was always told that women held a 3–4 percentage point advantage over men in elections. My own experience was a bit different. I ran against four men in the Republican primary and I towered over them all. “I am head and shoulders above all my opponents,” I said. “I have the highest profile in the race.” “All my opponents look up to me.” I have a really bad habit of liking puns, and I uttered those phrases more than once, which didn't endear me to the men. But at least I was having fun. And I studied, learned, and prepared to deliver a speech conveying just enough information to be relevant in a short period of time—the elevator speech.

Politics is like being in sales—you are selling the notion that you can do things for the people who elect you, and part of running for office is the sheer retail nature of it. Retail means sales—and what you

look like matters. When it is hotter than the hinges of hell and you are trying to convey coolness and calm at the front door of a prospective voter's door, well, it isn't easy.

Going door-to-door in sweltering heat knowing sweat is running down your back is not exactly the image of beauty you see on glossy magazine covers. I solved part of that problem by wearing white shirts, khaki skirts, and flats. The sweat was still there but mostly invisible.

I was trying to deliver some of my campaign materials to a door in a small community outside of Austin one day. A pickup truck was parked on the side of the street and as I approached the door, the sound of metal or a chain dragging caught my attention. The sound was getting louder and closer when a giant dog leaped out from under the truck, struggling to get to me and sink his teeth into my legs. Only the end of the chain held him back.

Yes, I was running. Running for office! I got the hell out of there. Not embarrassed much. Ever seen a cat fall wrong and then look around and glare? I suspect I did the same thing. Did anyone see me run? I left the next two streets off my door-to-door route.

Going to a door near dusk when you loom large is a challenge for the homeowner who might be unnerved at the long shadow. Because I was so tall I had to always stand back from the door.

The whole process of campaigning was daunting. I wasn't exactly a super chatty person, but I had to learn to tell my story, why I was running, and attempt to be memorable. I am grateful I was inspired by those plastic pickles and had my combs to rely on.

Another way to garner votes and get your message out is to attend functions or go where there are voters that you can approach. A memorable event occurred down in south Austin. On Friday nights at the Manchaca Fire Station there was a weekly fish fry, and the customers waiting in line often had a beer . . . or four . . . before picking up their food.

I had a stack of my push cards, which showed my photograph with that great new hair and makeup. I was ready with my elevator speech and my door-to-door speech, which had both worked well so far. I had not, however, previously dealt with the well-on-their-way-to-being-inebriated group.

I stated to one woman that I was running for district 47 in the Texas House of Representatives, and began to give my background. I explained that I was walking door-to-door, was a small business owner and former prosecutor, and hoped to get her support.

She stepped back and eyed me suspiciously. “Prostituter . . . walking door-to-door?”

It took me a minute to realize when I had said “prosecutor” she thought I was in a very different kind of business—on the other side of the law. I sputtered that I was former assistant district attorney—I threw people *in jail*—I was not a former prostitute!

I’m not sure what the economic model for door-to-door prostitution would have been, but it couldn’t have been very lucrative. After that, I was careful never again to say “prosecutor.” Lesson learned. I also believe the photo—the teased hair and brilliant blue eye shadow—gave the woman the wrong impression. We changed the picture.

The March primary ended with two out of the original five candidates in a runoff, and I had about forty-one percent of the votes going in. Then my opponent’s political dump truck pulled up and unloaded all kinds of insane and negative stuff about me. I had preserved good manners and emphasized only the positive up to that point. However—negative stuff absolutely works. Time was so limited before the runoff that we didn’t have enough of it (this was before Facebook and Twitter) to mount an effective reply. I could feel the mood shifting.

On the night of the runoff election, it looked as though I had lost by twenty-two votes. The next morning, I got up and sent letters to

all of my supporters thanking them for their hard work and stating how much I had enjoyed the effort. It was not easy—it wasn't so much that I had lost, but that so many people had worked so, so hard to help me win. Some of these people I had just met, but they gave up every Saturday for months to walk door-to-door and encourage others to vote for me. Or they made phone calls to voters on my behalf, or mailed postcards to friends and neighbors asking for their votes. Some even sent me their hard-earned money to support the printing of push cards, to buy more combs, or pay a few of the campaign staff. It was a humbling and wholly unique experience. Literally, it took an entire army of people to get to election day. And although it appeared I had lost, I enjoyed the experience immensely, learned a lot, and believed I had made a bunch of friends.

But politics can often breed suckers. Through the years and through the elections, I have learned a few tough lessons. The morning after my supposed loss in the Republican primary, many of my so-called political friends vanished. I had written a winning and a losing version of my thank-you letter. My campaign director sent the “losing” version out the morning after the runoff, which was Wednesday. Instead of staying and doing the work she had agreed on, by Thursday morning she had cleaned out her desk, removed her family photos, and vamoosed. Gone. Adios. I had expected her to continue working for several weeks as we shut down the office because I was paying her to do so.

When it was discovered just two days later that there was a box of votes in a precinct that had not yet been counted, she called and wanted to know if I needed help. Thanks, but no thanks. On top of it all, I also discovered she had augmented her educational background on her résumé. I was dismayed but by that point unsurprised.

I very much place a premium on good, straightforward people, as

we all should. How much does honesty cost? Not much. But, as I had learned from my father, the opposite is expensive—in life, friendships, jobs, happiness. That knowledge helped prepare me for the world I was about to step into—in ways I had not yet contemplated.

Yes, politics brings strange people to the table. But it also brings really good friends. That Thursday, before I realized there was still a chance for me in the runoff, I was walking in a parking lot from a local store. Toni Barcellona, a woman I have now known for over twenty years, was driving by and stopped to greet me really warmly. I needed a little TLC and she gave it! Not so the people who had been waiting for me to get power so I could help them in my new position. She was a friend who knew what it's like to have ups and downs. She is a strong, focused, honest person, and I am happy to say that she is very successful, still in her chosen arena, politics.

So, back to the votes. Two days after the election, a courthouse in a suburb in the district discovered a box of votes that had been locked up but never counted. This discovery was thanks to the keen observation of the teenaged son of the person who first encouraged me to run for office—Brad Shields, the guy in the Senate gallery who uttered the “piece of cake” phrase. The number of votes had been seen but not tallied for either the “winner” or me. I had to make a formal request for a recount and pay for it personally in order to even get the box opened. No, this was not 1948 in Duval County, Texas, where a box of ballots was “discovered,” helping LBJ pull out a victory over Coke Stevenson for a congressional seat. This was 1992 in Travis County, and this was a legitimate discovery.

The recount showed that I had won by seven votes. Friends joked that my new name was Landslide Combs, modeled on Landslide Lyndon. My opponent said he wouldn't file a lawsuit, and that he believed I had won fair and square. Sure. At five minutes of five on the

lawsuit-filing deadline, he filed a lawsuit. The claim was that Democrats had voted in their own primary, then crossed over to the Republican side to vote in our runoff, which is not allowed by law, and those votes would be discarded. They found fifteen individuals who had done that, subpoenaed them, and eight showed up for court.

My opponent clearly believed that I was the recipient of the Democrat votes. These voters were required under oath to state whom they had voted for, much to their collective outrage. He believed that I was going to lose votes because they would state they had voted for me. The first two stated they had voted for him, which meant that the math showed I had won by two votes. Yep, two votes. Needless to say, I was both elated and exhausted.

There was one other very bright spot. I was able to persuade Lisa Woods to return from out of state to come back and manage my fall general election campaign. I am eternally grateful for two reasons: She is super smart, capable, and disciplined and I have to thank her very much for all the campaigns we worked on together. And more importantly, she is one of my all-time best friends. When you can laugh with someone at all hours of the day and night, you have found a treasure.

About a year and a half later, I got a call from one of the two consultants for the opponent who had unloaded such nasty and dishonest things about me. He called to apologize, and said what he had done was unconscionable. I was floored. I was also touched that he cared enough about his integrity that he felt he needed to apologize. To this day, I think fondly of his courage, because it surely took some to call me up. The campaign they waged was really terrible—not just according to me but to others who witnessed it. The other consultant has never brought it up, and my opponent claimed he didn't know about it. Of course he did. We own our campaigns, as we own all of our actions in life. Saying he didn't was moral cowardice.

So there are good people, weak people, strong and honest people—individuals that pretty much reflect the population. The problem with the weak ones is that they often wield way too much power and are frequently held unaccountable. Remember this, and learn how to manage people who have these characteristics—it is critical to your success, and the rule applies across all sectors and areas.

Once the lawsuit was behind us, and the victory of the primary election was ours, it was time to focus on the November general election—which we won. Thanks again to an abundance of really great, determined, and generous people who gave all they had helping ensure a victory. Even though many of them are still my friends, I have lost contact with others over the years. But I want to thank each of them again here. The incredible experiences I had for twenty-plus years started in 1992 with all of them.

*Saying “yes” and taking a risk can alter the direction  
of your life in very positive and powerful ways.*

After the November victory, I remember feeling like I was a dog who had just caught the car (I actually envisioned a dog with teeth gripping a bumper for dear life) and we’d be at the Texas legislature in two months or so. The bumper was in my teeth and I was hanging on for a wild ride. One idle conversation above the Senate chamber had sent me in an entirely new direction. I had been asked and I had said “yes.” Saying “yes” and taking a risk can alter the direction of your life in very positive and powerful ways.

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An early glimpse of life as a freshman came unpleasantly. We were in the Insurance Building on the east side of the capitol while the new



underground extension was being built. Freshman Dorm is what our two floors were named. I had found out how to get office furniture and met the wonderful woman in charge of the effort. She was delightful, I followed her every suggestion, and I was proud of my efforts to be early and organized. I got my furniture and it was delivered to my new office, which consisted of an open reception area, accessible to anyone, and two locked offices behind.

I went home that day feeling tired but successful. I had furniture, an office, and I was ready. Imagine how I felt the next morning when I arrived to find about half of my furniture had been stolen and moved to another freshman's office. The only reason I still had furniture in my back offices is because they had been locked. Wow.

I guess we were electing furniture crooks who decided it was easier to take other people's furniture instead of doing the work of finding their own chairs, tables, and the rare sofa. I never did find the furniture I had chosen and was forced to accept the junk the unknown thief had deposited in its place. I suspect they put my furniture inside their own offices and then promptly locked the doors. Lesson learned: Pledges of honesty and probity aren't always upheld.

Another incident, rather amusing, was receiving my first set of business cards as a state legislator. They came with my name printed at an angle. I asked if I were already being identified as a crooked legislator. Nervous laughter. The cards were reprinted promptly.

From such an inauspicious beginning, I nonetheless enjoyed that first legislative session. I met fascinating people from all parts of the state and from all walks of life. Women were powerful in that session. Libby Linebarger, from Austin, was chairman of the House Education Committee and she did a phenomenal job with a very difficult and contentious issue. She was unfailingly polite and although she and I were of different parties, I really liked and respected her. Senfronia Thompson, a legislator from Houston, was and still is a law unto

herself. She also was a Democrat and ferociously focused, especially on an issue that had the potential to help so many Texas women. She wanted to pass a law on alimony and she finally got it done in the next session, as I remember. She was widely feared and widely respected. Republicans were a distinct minority. Later leaders such as Jane Nelson and Florence Shapiro in the Senate and Myra Crownover, Geanie Morrison, and Lois Kolkhorst in the House helped craft and pass landmark legislation.

But it is hard for women of both parties. Why? For many women, family concerns weighed on our minds. My three sons were only twenty-five minutes away, but others had to travel hours to be with their families. It was unmistakable that the toll taken on families was felt the most by women. Libby Linebarger, who was the mother of young twins, ultimately retired to be with her family. It was a hard decision, but I certainly understood it.

When I decided to run for office, I had high expectations. Smart ideas would have good outcomes. Reason would always prevail. What mattered was the power of ideas. Uh, not so fast.

My freshman year, I had managed to file several bills, and successfully get two of them out through their specific committee. The next step for the bills was to go through the Calendars Committee, which was like a cattle chute. What does that mean? Imagine that you have 15 or 20 committees, and about 5000 bills are filed. Not every one gets a hearing in committee because there simply isn't enough time. And often no committee member even wants the bill heard so it is dead anyway. And those that do get a hearing may not get voted out of committee and sent to the Calendars Committee, where there is a further winnowing because of the limited time on the House or Senate Floor and the logjam of bills piling up. The jam gets higher as the session comes to a close. That committee is truly a black box—what goes in

may never, ever come out. And the process is very opaque. But I didn't know that at the time, due to my naïveté.

I just assumed my bills, which were perfect and brilliant, would sail through the process. On the ranch, every cow was finally accounted for, but to continue the analogy, in the legislature some “cows” went in, and a whole bunch disappeared. I solicited advice from a state representative named Robert Eckels from Houston who was on the committee. I asked him what to do to move my bills out of the Calendars Committee in order to get them in a position to be voted on the floor.

He told me, “Work the committee.” What was that? He further explained, “Go see every member of the Calendars Committee and explain the bill to him or her and get feedback.” I did exactly as he suggested. Muted responses. Then I decided to be memorable. I got index cards for each member, Scotch-taped a Jolly Rancher candy to each card (since I was a rancher, why not be jolly?) and wrote on the cards, “I hope you will think sweet thoughts” about the particular bill. My handwriting is normally pretty bad so I toiled over each one. All was going well until I got to the chairman of the committee, Mark Stiles. He was a tall, imposing figure, not known for suffering fools gladly.

“Combs, I don't like candy.” That immediate response gave me pause.

“What would you prefer?”

“Chewing tobacco. Beechnut.”

I stomped back to my office swearing I would never give in to that kind of nonsense. Two days later, the bill was still sitting in Calendars, so I asked a staffer to get me some Beechnut chewing tobacco. I handed over the money and hoped it would work. If I was going to have to play the game with vigor, I decided to up the ante. I asked the House photographer to document me giving the chewing tobacco to the chairman.

I wrote the bill numbers of both of my bills on the packet of Beechnut along with “Hi there, Mark,” and some hearts and x’s. I handed it to him and kissed his forehead way high up as the House photographer took our picture. Both bills were out of committee within forty-eight hours.

*If the straightforward path won’t work, get creative  
and go around it. If it’s important, don’t quit.*

Another lesson learned. If the straightforward path won’t work, get creative and go around it. If it’s important, don’t quit. I was not in the slightest embarrassed. I had learned that I needed to be creative and proactive if I wanted to get my two bills (out of the many thousands of bills in committees) out onto the House floor for a vote and keep them moving to passage. Pragmatism ruled the day. It was a very useful lesson for many areas—for that situation and different ones to come. There is usually some other way to get things done, even if at first you can’t spot the solution.

The session wore on into the spring, and late-night committee meetings became the norm. Although I was only seeing my two sons still at home a couple of nights a week, I was able to make it up over the weekend. The third son was off at school at the Texas Academy of Math and Science in Denton and later in college.

We had pagers back then and my youngest son, David, learned how to have me paged. I remember being at the front mike on the House floor and feeling this weird buzz. It was the eleven-year-old. He missed me and it was hard for him. I was so glad I could be home every night, even if it was late. But it was difficult at times to balance being a mom and being at work. Two of the boys had birthdays during the session and I picked up their birthday cakes, a month apart, at 2:30 in

the morning from the bakery in the Safeway grocery store. Thankfully, they were open at that time! But the good news was that the session was only every other year and then just 140 days long. For those of us who work jobs that don't have usual hours, it can be challenging. But somehow, we make it work, don't we?

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Late in a legislative session, people are tired. It grinds on and a bit of light relief is welcome. Humor definitely has its place. A House member named Renato Cuellar had a whistle stashed in his desk, and several times during my first session, he would blow the whistle as a bill would come crashing down, brought down by a barrage of "No" votes. It sounded like a train whistle and it made all of us laugh.

Or the members of the House would poke fun at another House member who had written a poorly drafted bill. One of my long time friends, David Swinford, from a very rural part of the state, had written a bill about labeling seeds. As drafted, it would have meant that each and every single, individual seed would require its own label—instead of requiring the packaging to be labeled. Oops! Consternation ensued when he realized what he had done.

He went to the front mike where bills are presented and asked for everyone to vote against his bill. He then went to the back mike where you pose questions of the bill sponsor and asked the same again. An unusual request, to say the least.

The voting results are illustrated by lights on a big board at the front of the House. Green means "yes," red means "no," and white means "present not voting."

There was a wave of flickering lights. At first, the entire 150 votes showed bright green. David was getting panicky. He begged us to

kill his bill. Then they all showed white or present not voting. David pleaded again for us to kill his bill. Finally, the board turned completely red. He was so relieved.

I found a lesson here too. Many of the House members have decades-long friendships. I certainly do. It was a good experience to be among colleagues, and we all supported one another when we could. We had to represent our districts and do right by our constituents, but we could also treat one another with respect, laugh, argue, and also remain friends. Yes, there were contentious times and plenty of disagreements, but the critical part of the work was that each of us was ultimately working together for the betterment of the state and its millions of citizens.

Occasionally the House floor could turn a bit weird. It turns out to be no surprise that men sometimes have a problem with women . . . about sex. Twenty-five years ago I decided to write a romance novel. I had read a whole slew of them, joined a writing group for input and advice, and forged ahead with writing it. I was totally surprised it got published under my own name—back in the late '80s. It wasn't a bodice ripper, just the kind of book that was sold back then in drugstores. I loved my characters. They talked and argued and did what they wanted and I kept typing, basically recording what they were saying. It was pretty much a cookie-cutter, Harlequin Romance-type book from years past. It wasn't a blockbuster, barn burner, or a bust. It almost paid the publisher back my small advance. When I had my incredible legislative primary, it didn't come up at all.

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Piece of advice, which bears repeating many, many times: Do not ever put your own name on a romance novel if you have any expectation of getting into politics. Or if you do, get ready to brave the comments and the harassment, mostly by the opposite sex. Printed copies of the chapter where man meets woman in the bedroom made the rounds while I was serving in the House of Representatives, and various chairmen of important committees thought it important to let me know they were reading it. I didn't feel it was sexist, just normal legislative harassment. The things the guys did to each other were phenomenal. This was pretty minor, and I thought it was funny. Remember, I had seen my share of calf castrations on the ranch and there was almost nothing anyone could say that would cause me embarrassment. I gave as good as I got.

The members were way too bored, and it was nearly the last week of the session. My major landmark legislation was on the House floor, ready to head to the Senate for the all-important final vote. I was defending it from the front microphone and then—a friend of mine, a state rep from Houston, strolled up to the questioner's microphone at the back of the chamber and asked:

“Representative Combs, do you feel a deep, burning, extraordinarily passionate desire to pass this bill?”

Huh? What was he talking about? Light dawned. The book. I had already been made aware that “the guys” were titillated by, well, mammarys. Guess that is where the adjective “titillated” comes from. I paused and then the devil made me do it.

Southern accent time. I put my hand to my throat, and told him, in the best, yet safest, imitation I could manage of Meg Ryan at the famous lunch scene, “Yes, I do. I would do just about anything for this bill.” I tugged at the collar of my suit as though I were too hot. Heads were turning. No one around the floor had the foggiest idea about

what was going on. The floor was silent. My friend smiled, said he liked the bill, and the bill passed.

One little problem. Unbeknownst to me, my husband and oldest son, just back from his third year at MIT, were in the audience, sitting up in the gallery. Yes, I had plenty to explain later. But it also showed my son I was a human, and that there is more than one way to handle harassment from others. Grace and humor come in handy when the situation is not too serious.

After all the fun and accomplishments I had while in the House of Representatives, I decided to run for higher statewide office, for the position of Agriculture Commissioner. All of a sudden my romance novel became a cause célèbre. I was proud I had decided to write a book and that I was able to get it published. What was the issue here, other than one chapter that talked about intimacy between two consenting adults? To a few people, it was a big deal and in a very icky way. Several male reporters got way too invested in talking about “the chapter” where “the scenes” were. I honestly believe one reporter from the *Statesman* had some kind of male-female troubles, because he displayed a near obsession with the book. He couldn’t shut up about it. On and on. Good grief. He needed to get a real life. He implied there was something weird about me having written it, and he wrote about it repeatedly. The point, in his view, was that a woman who wrote this kind of book was of questionable worth. He didn’t write about my qualifications for the higher office I was seeking with anywhere near the same zeal.

Another reporter, who positioned himself as hugely funny, basically said all romance novels were trash and women who read them were essentially dumb. Not that he used that word, but he belittled all readers and writers of the genre, which meant he was taking aim at women. Romance Writers of America took issue. Austin is a place



that prides itself on being progressive, forward thinking. And generally people in Austin value women and advocate for equal rights. What on earth was going on now? Austin, twenty-first century, left of center, was showing nineteenth-century views of women, morality, and culture. Was it all just because I am a Republican? Maybe. But the deliberate contempt shown for women, the demeaning of them through the successful genre of romance novels, and the almost palpable dislike for me because I wrote a romance novel seemed heavy handed. As women, we can find a lot of different ways to manage these occurrences effectively—often through using humor in reverse—but we must also work to change attitudes and behavior, as should men. Period.

Juxtaposed with these ugly interactions was the fun I had with an editor some time later. I was in an editorial board interview with *The Dallas Morning News* while I was running for State Comptroller/Treasurer in 2006. My Democratic opponent took verbal flight as he opined that there was no way I could ever hold any kind of responsible position since I had written the novel. I am not kidding. He hadn't read the book, as far as I know, but the newspaper articles describing my prose were quite lurid, once again picking up words and adjectives from the famous chapter. The opponent was horrified that such a book even existed, and he made it clear that I was therefore unfit for any kind of public office. The male newspaper editor continued to ask question after question, questions that I, as a former assistant district attorney, would call leading. My opponent took the bait and basically revealed that his entire campaign strategy was based on the book, and how it disqualified me from serving in public life.

*Find your allies, and take no guff.*

We finished the interview and the editor asked me to stay behind. He opened his jacket and, with a smile, removed from an inside pocket a copy of my book, which he asked me to autograph. I did, and thought it was pretty funny that he had deliberately and cleverly led my opponent to make those ridiculous remarks. He was supporting me in his own way. Sadly, I cannot say these kinds of interactions are unique to me. I think women face unfair judgments frequently. I say: Do as I did. Be strong and move ahead. Find your allies, and take no guff. As the author Alice Walker said, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”

As it turned out, many of my former colleagues who’d wavered around the burning hot, infamous chapter, asked me to send them a copy. I obliged, inscribing each one by name, noting that each man had been the inspiration for the book’s hero, Ross, and that I was thinking of them when I wrote the character. Not true, of course, since I had written the book years earlier. But it seemed to be poetic justice. I wonder how many of them showed those inscriptions to their wives?

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Women are generally believed by the public to be more honest and more ethical than men; whether or not we are too chicken to be crooked, we just aren’t as bad as the guys. I personally like to think it is because we are more real-world—and we represent over half of the population, big chunks of the economy, and have to deal with families, work, communities, and so forth. I suspect we end up having to cover more of life’s bases than the men, and being a bad player just takes up too much time.

Since politics involves power and money, it makes sense for women to be very attentive to the purse strings. We decide about home

mortgages, car payments, student debt, and long-term financial issues for our family. If we have a significant other in our lives, we do those things in tandem. And whether you earn a lot or a little, or stay at home, these issues matter. The financial decisions we make have significant impacts in each of our lives, and the more we know, the better prepared we are for the inevitable unexpected events.

Politics can, of course, appear in our religious institutions, universities, schools, and communities. Any decision-making ultimately involves the art of politicking.

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What do women need to do to be more effective power players? My own observation is that you have to always make allies, count your votes, work the “room,” and keep on plugging. And maybe even jump into the arena yourself if you want to be an effective contributor to society in this way.

What is noteworthy in all of this experience is that some things don't change. More than twenty years later we are still debating about water, education, roads, you name it. So things get done and then undone. You win for a while, lose, get back up, and keep on going.

One more thing. Another significant part of this experience was that I was willing to jump in the ring. I was focused and pragmatic about it, I didn't give up, and I won. But I didn't just win an election that catapulted me into a whole new arena; I also fought and won to become a greater participant in what happens in our society—and to do it in a very different and amazing way.

I believe strongly that we need more women in the world of law-making and governing. In Texas, only about 22 percent of the members in the Texas State House and Senate are women—and only three

of our thirty-six congressional members are women. Since Kay Bailey Hutchison retired from the US Senate, both of our US Senators are men. Yes, female numbers have risen over the past decades, but they are still not representative of the number of women in our state. Diversity in our representation is needed and critical—not only for the events occurring today, but also for the way those events impact the next generation.

We want our daughters, granddaughters, sisters, and others to know they can be a part of better governing—and they should be. So, for any woman out there now who is considering running for public office—be it for the local school board or a congressional seat—jump in. It is a lot of hard work, it will most likely not be a piece of cake, but you will love it, learn from it, and grow in incredible ways. Do it. Your community, state, and country are waiting for your leadership.