



Joe Klein

Running Against the Big Shots

JUST SAW YOU ON TELEVISION, THE ELDERLY WOMAN IS SAYING FROM behind her screen door. "Were they attacking me, or was I talking?" Steve Laffey, a Republican running for the U.S. Senate from Rhode Island, asks. It was an ad, the woman says. About your parents. Alzheimer's, she says. Laffey's father has Alzheimer's. The ad is about the working-class modesty of the Laffey family. The candidate is going door to door on Lionel Avenue in Coventry, Rhode Island, on a quiet evening. He is accompanied by a mob that includes his wife and five children, plus assorted childhood friends of his and *their* children ... plus a

clutch of campaign workers trailed by a very large recreational vehicle plastered with yellow-and-blue LAFFEY FOR SENATE signs. A mystical average-folks communion is taking place: a whole lot of folks on Lionel Avenue have been watching the local news and have seen the ad. "My mother has Alzheimer's," a woman says. A retired teacher named Mary Monahan says, "I'm voting for you. I've been waiting to tell you personally," a reference to Laffey's habit of descending on unsuspecting neighborhoods with his horde, dashing from house to house. He and his troops wear sneakers, shorts and blue baseball hats with his name. "See," the candidate says, sweating through his yellow polo shirt. "It's happening. They know me. There are intense feelings about me on both sides. That's great! Ronald Reagan was a polarizer, and he won Rhode Island."

In the bleached landscape of American politics, this year's Republican U.S. Senate primary in Rhode Island is grand opera in Technicolor. Laffey is a conservative, supported by a virulently anti-tax group, the Club for Growth. The incumbent, Lincoln Chafee, is a breathtakingly courageous moderate: he opposed the Bush tax cuts and was the only Republican to vote against the war in Iraq. But there is a lot more going on here than dueling political philosophies. There is a truckload of New England sociology.

Chafee is an Episcopalian aristocrat who inherited the Senate seat once held by his father John Chafee. "Linc is barely a politician," says a Democratic colleague. "He's the only Senator I know who isn't infatuated with the sound of his own voice." Indeed, Chafee the Younger seems a refugee from the counterculture: he worked as a blacksmith and horseshoer after graduating from Brown University with a classics degree in 1975. He has a benign, diffident, slightly spacey aspect. Visiting a senior citizens' center last week, Chafee apologized for interrupting lunch. "Don't worry! We love you," a woman shouted, and, I swear, Chafee blushed. Later I asked him why he remained a Republican. "It feels very comfortable locally. In Rhode Island, Democrats are the entrenched power, and we're the reform party. Regionally, it's comfortable too," and Chafee rattled off a list of Northeastern Republican mod-

erates. "In Washington, though, there has been a big shift to the Sun Belt Republicans. They have different priorities. I think I stand for traditional Republican values. We've always been the party of fiscal responsibility. Of conservation. We've always warned against foreign entanglements and opposed government getting mixed up in personal lives."

Not recently, though. Laffey represents the Republican Party that Ronald Reagan built. His father was a union machinist. Laffey was the first in his family to go to college (Bowdoin, and then Harvard Business

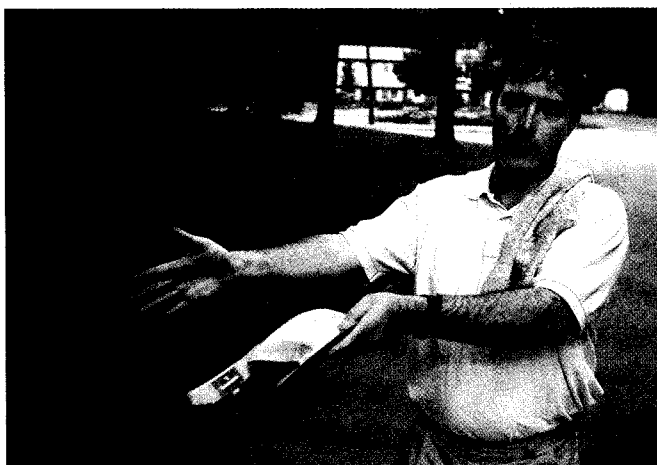
School). But the family story was far more complicated than that. His eldest brother, whom Laffey describes as a "promiscuous homosexual," died of AIDS. His elder brother and a younger sister suffer from schizophrenia. "These guys saved me," he says, pointing toward his childhood pals blitzing the suburban street in Coventry. "We were a tribe. Their parents took me in. I only made it out because of them." He went on to manage an investment bank and then came home to Cranston, Rhode Island, ran for mayor and helped save the city from bankruptcy by challenging the local public employees' unions but also

by raising taxes, a heresy overlooked by his sponsors at the Club for Growth. He has, belatedly, pledged not to raise taxes if elected to the Senate.

Laffey is all adrenaline, the metabolic opposite of Chafee. And despite espousing the usual grab bag of social and economic conservative positions, he seems to most enjoy populist tirades against corporate special interests (especially the oil companies: he favors a robust alternative-energy plan for national-security reasons) and also against federal spending. "If you want big checks like the \$150 million Chafee brought

back from the \$27 billion highway bill, vote for him. Rhode Island gets the short end of the stick when it comes to earmarks. I mean, the bridge to nowhere alone was \$223 million," he says, referring to the famed Alaskan boondoggle. "I'm going to vote against all that."

If he gets the chance. Both Laffey and Chafee trail Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse, another Protestant aristocrat, in the polls. Rhode Island voted overwhelmingly for John Kerry in 2004; it probably hasn't grown any fonder of George W. Bush since then. Laffey doesn't care. He's running on a different wavelength, against the big shots in both parties. "Have you ever seen a campaign like this?" he exclaims, jogging to the next house. No and, sort of, yes. A fellow named Ned Lamont just overturned the Establishment next door, in Connecticut. ■



U.S. Senate candidate Steve Laffey goes door to door in Rhode Island

ROBERT SPENCER—THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDFUX



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