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Challenger in Arkansas Is Unafraid to Ruffle

By SHAILA DEWAN

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Lara Bergthold, a left-wing political consultant, has a word of advice for the labor unions and national liberal groups that recruited the challenger who is giving Senator [Blanche Lincoln](#) the fight of her political life: caveat emptor.

Senator Lincoln, a two-term Democrat, had been judged too conservative, and her critics found a willing alternative in Lt. Gov. [Bill Halter](#), whom they hailed as a “true progressive.”

But Ms. Bergthold, who spent weeks in 2003 working with Mr. Halter on Gen. [Wesley K. Clark](#)’s presidential campaign, said Mr. Halter had been among the most conservative voices in the room, even pooh-poohing the importance of meeting with labor unions and other key segments of the Democratic base.

Now, Ms. Bergthold worries that the groups that have poured millions of dollars into his campaign might not know what they are getting. Compared with Mrs. Lincoln, a senator for 12 years, Mr. Halter is a political cipher, with no voting record and several chapters of his history unexamined.

“I don’t like to see him turned into a progressive darling on the national stage when I know him to be something different,” Ms. Bergthold said. “He’s a political opportunist.”

But what critics call opportunism, supporters say is simply a willingness to buck the established political order. With union firepower behind him, Mr. Halter finished only two points behind Mrs. Lincoln in the May 18

primary, forcing her into a runoff.

A successful primary challenge against such a high-ranking incumbent is highly unusual, but Mr. Halter has astutely capitalized on the discontent with Mrs. Lincoln on the part of both national groups and Arkansas voters.

His ambition, though, has disenchanted a long list of former allies, beginning with his first adult job in Arkansas in the early 1990s, as director of a public policy group.

Mr. Halter's biography says he grew up in North Little Rock, the son of a nurse and a small-business man. His father did not actually own a business, but ran the mortgage arm of a bank.

The younger Mr. Halter sacked groceries, became valedictorian of Catholic High School for Boys, got a scholarship to [Stanford University](#) and became a Rhodes scholar. He worked at [McKinsey & Company](#), the consulting firm, and then as the chief economist for the Senate Finance Committee.

His first return to Little Rock was rough. In 1991, he was hired to lead the new Arkansas Institute, a now defunct organization financed by wealthy businessmen like Sam Walton of Wal-Mart. To preserve the institute's nonpartisan identity, Mr. Halter was hired on the condition that he not get involved with [Bill Clinton](#)'s incipient presidential campaign, recalled Walter Smiley, then the chairman of the institute's board.

But Mr. Halter took to disappearing from the office in the afternoons, and staff members who disliked their boss followed him to the Clinton campaign office, Mr. Smiley said. "He and I had clearly agreed he would not do that," Mr. Smiley said. "I know I talked to him about it up front, because he was a politically inclined person."

Mr. Halter was fired, Mr. Smiley said.

Mr. Halter remembers things differently, saying that he had permission to work for the Clinton campaign and that the parting from the institute was mutually agreed upon. After he left, he joined the Clinton campaign and subsequently the administration, working first in the budget office and then as deputy director of the [Social Security Administration](#).

His campaign literature and advertisements make much of the fact that as deputy director he fought off efforts

to privatize **Social Security**. But in a recent interview he acknowledged that privatization was not a major threat during the Clinton years.

After serving on the board of several technology companies, Mr. Halter joined the Clark campaign as the traveling chief of staff, quickly frustrating other team members with what they described as an overbearing style.

“The one thing that united the campaign was dislike of Bill Halter,” Ms. Bergthold said. “He was the only person I know of that left the campaign not of his own volition.”

Again, Mr. Halter said he was not fired but chose to leave. General Clark did not respond to a request for comment for this article, but is supporting Mrs. Lincoln in the primary.

In 2005, Mr. Halter moved back to Arkansas, this time with the bold plan of running for governor. At the time, the attorney general, Mike Beebe, was widely assumed to be destined for the Democratic nomination. Mr. Halter ultimately stepped aside, saying he wanted to avoid hurting Democrats in a damaging primary, and made an 11th-hour entry into the race for lieutenant governor, spending more than \$1 million of his own money to defeat two current lawmakers and a former one, which did nothing to bolster his popularity in the Capitol.

Mr. Beebe, now the governor, has made no secret that he keeps Mr. Halter at arm’s length.

While some saw the idea of challenging Mr. Beebe as pure hubris, people like Vince Chadick, a lawyer in Fayetteville who is now the treasurer of the Halter Senate campaign, found Mr. Halter’s résumé persuasive and said he has never understood why so many people view the candidate as conceited.

“I realized what he had made of himself and what opportunities he had taken advantage of,” Mr. Chadick said.

“I just felt like this is a guy who will not be satisfied with the status quo.”

He has not been.

As lieutenant governor, Mr. Halter took the unheard-of step of presenting his own legislative agenda. When lawmakers declined to move forward on a state lottery to finance college scholarships, Mr. Halter conducted a petition drive to submit the issue to a referendum, and it passed in a landslide.

He supported increasing the minimum wage, expanding prekindergarten education, and raising teachers' pay. He also drove other politicians to distraction with his smoke signals, first flirting with running against Senator Mark Pryor, a fellow Democrat, then with entering the race to succeed Representative Vic Snyder, also a Democrat.

Finally, after an intense courtship by national liberal groups, he challenged Mrs. Lincoln.

Skeptical liberals argue that a lottery is hardly the most progressive way to finance education, and point to instances like Mr. Halter's repeated assertion that he supported a ban on gay foster parents during his 2006 campaign, when he faced a Republican opponent who campaigned on social issues. Two years later, Mr. Halter joined Mr. Beebe in opposing a referendum that barred gay men and lesbians from adopting or fostering children.

Mr. Halter says he supported a ban in 2006 only if it were constitutional and proved to be in the best interests of children.

But while Mr. Halter may not pass a liberal purity test, he has never claimed that he would. Instead, he has struck a populist chord, saying that he would have supported a public option similar to [Medicare](#) in the health care bill, that he is more fiscally conservative than Mrs. Lincoln, and that he would most likely favor some version of a compromise bill that would make it easier to unionize.

But when he is asked about his union support, he responds that he has nothing to do with campaigning by outside groups.

He has been an extraordinarily disciplined campaigner, always on message even during lengthy interviews. Cross-examined about his decisions to seek office, the answer is always that people out there, real Arkansans, asked him to run. He says the thing he hates most about campaigning is — no surprise — the time away from his wife, Shanti, and two daughters, ages 1 and 3.

Asked — beseeched — for a telling anecdote not within his rehearsed repertory, he tells of a voter who was grateful that the lottery would pay tuition for her three children.

Mr. Halter has proved astute in other ways, taking his case for a Senate seat directly to the voters, just as he did with the lottery.

“I hope that people will see that I’m doing the best that I can possibly do to advance policies that will help middle-class Arkansans,” he said. “If that means bucking special interest groups, fine, I’m built to take that. Look at my experience as lieutenant governor as actual experience doing that. If I’ve got a little political scar tissue, that’s fine.”

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