

...Ivy Baker Priest Cashes In

The first woman to hold a statewide constitutional office in California was Ivy Baker Priest. A Republican, she unseated incumbent Democrat Bert Betts to become state treasurer during the Ronald Reagan landslide in 1966. Described by one reporter as a woman with “matronly grace and charm,” Priest took full advantage of her name to capture the election.

A former GOP national committeewoman from Utah, Priest had been appointed US Treasurer by President Dwight Eisenhower after he took office in 1953. As such, her signature was on signed every piece of paper currency that the government printed during her eight-year tenure as Treasurer. During her California campaign, Priest often told her audiences, “I’ve handled more money than any other woman in the world. When I was treasurer, we replaced \$1.5 billion in money every year.”

The Priest campaign understood the value of name identification. Her campaign kits included dollar bills bearing her signature. One prop was a huge reproduction of a one-dollar bill that she had signed. A widow, Priest married Sidney Stevens in 1961, but she successfully petitioned a California court to grant her permission to drop the Stevens surname during the campaign and be known as Ivy Baker Priest. The gambit apparently worked. A full 11 months before the election, her polls showed that 22 percent of voters recognized her name; only nine percent recognized the name of Betts, a two-term incumbent. She won a narrow victory.

Campaigning for reelection in 1970, she took credit for earning more money on investments during her first term than any state treasurer in U.S. history – more than \$350 million. And she was quick with a quip. She once tried to replicate George Washington folklore by tossing a coin across the Sacramento River. With news photographers assembled to record the stunt, the coin plopped a few feet from shore. Perhaps expecting such an outcome, Priest quickly replied, “A dollar doesn’t go very far these days.”

Sources: Associated Press, October 10, 1966, United Press International, December 4, 1965, *Decatur Daily Review*, December 13, 1965, Associated Press, February 21, 1967, *Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram*, October 31, 1970,