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TN ELECTIONS

Meet Ward Baker, the strategist behind Marsha Blackburn's winning US Senate campaign



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Key Points

Ward Baker, 42, is a Tennessee native and graduate of Benton Hall Academy in Franklin. He served in the Marines.

Blackburn's historic win is just the latest in a string of victories that Baker has played a role in.

Baker's clients have included Mitch McConnell, Bob Corker, Chuck Fleischmann and Diane Black.

Baker is known for his data-driven approach to politics and a level of intensity more common in the military than politics.

When Republican Marsha Blackburn celebrated her U.S. Senate victory over Democrat Phil Bredesen on Tuesday, she heaped praise on many of her backers throughout the race.

“You know one person does not win a campaign,” she said, thanking the many volunteers who helped knock on 1.5 million doors and make 3 million phone calls throughout the 13-month campaign.

She also thanked her campaign leadership team, and the first name she mentioned was Ward Baker, the 42-year-old Tennessee native and graduate of Benton Hall Academy in Nashville who served as Blackburn's campaign strategist.

Unlike many supporters and volunteers whom Blackburn's campaign recruited during the race, Baker, who was standing behind the senator-elect on the stage, has a relationship with the Brentwood Republican that dates back decades.

“Marsha and her family have been close friends and encouraged me throughout my career. I owe them a debt of gratitude,” Baker told the USA TODAY NETWORK - Tennessee.

“I wanted to work for Marsha Blackburn because I knew that voters would see what I see — and that they would come to decide that she is the one best able to represent them.”

Blackburn’s historic win — she is Tennessee’s first female U.S. senator — is just the latest in a string of victories that Baker has played a role in, leading political insiders to view him as one of the pre-eminent figures in politics today.

Washington and Tennessee connections

Baker’s foray into politics came in 2002, shortly after he got out of the Marine Corps and started working on the state Senate race for Jim Bryson and Blackburn’s congressional campaign.

From there Baker went on to work on the campaigns of former Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour and President George W. Bush’s 2004 re-election effort.

In the years since, Baker’s clients have included Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, U.S. Sens. Marco Rubio, Cory Gardner, Bill Cassidy and Deb Fischer, and Alabama Lt. Gov. Will Ainsworth.

In Tennessee, in addition to Blackburn, Baker's clients have included U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, U.S. Reps. Chuck Fleischmann and Diane Black and newly elected U.S. Rep. John Rose, as well as state Sen. Jack Johnson.

And during the 2014 and 2016 election cycles, he served as executive director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the group charged with helping the GOP win Senate seats.

Gov. Bill Haslam, who talks frequently to Baker, said he is one of a limited number of people who have played such a prominent role on the big stage.

"It's a fairly small world of people who understand how to run statewide campaigns and have done it successfully," he said.

Johnson, the Tennessee state senator who views Baker as the brother he never had, said, “In state and national politics, he’s an absolute superstar.”

“There’s not a United States senator who does not know who Ward Baker is,” Johnson said.

Fischer, the Nebraska U.S. senator, said she has known Baker for six years and points to his work ethic.

"I've long considered him a 'philosopher warrior' who thoughtfully and joyfully engages in politics," she said.

Baker is so well known in national political circles that Steve Bannon — President Donald Trump's former chief strategist — once put him on a short list of Republicans, including McConnell and Karl Rove, who would soon see their "day of reckoning."

Haslam said he joked with Baker about being on Bannon's "bad list," but it was also the Breitbart founder's effort to throw the Tennessean into the Republican Party's "bad crowd."

"Since that time I think they've proven differently," Haslam said.

Baker, who is closely tied to McConnell and many other Republican senators, has connections that even extend into the White House.

The Baker household's national connections aren't limited to him. Baker's wife, Jennifer, is a spokeswoman for the National Rifle Association.

'Death by 10,000 cuts': Ward Baker's intense approach to politics

Beyond his reputation, Baker is known for his data-driven approach to politics and a level of intensity more common in the military than politics.

In the middle of this year's Senate race, Baker said the campaign would be won by "death by 10,000 cuts" and half-jokingly said he was keeping a "list of everybody that's screwing us" in reference to Republicans backing Blackburn's Democratic opponent.

Baker's comments drew the ire of Democrats, who filed a complaint with the Federal Election Commission alleging illegal coordination between Blackburn's campaign and outside groups.

Johnson said Baker's passion for politics is nothing new. After a long day of door knocking in Johnson's 2006 primary race for the state Senate, he and Baker once yelled at each other while standing nose to nose.

"In retrospect, it was at that moment that I realized I think he wanted me to win more than I wanted to win," Johnson said.

Baker, who throughout the Senate campaign was awake by 4 a.m. crunching data from the day before, has a similarly heightened approach with his staff.

“I want everyone who works with me to become better than me,” he said. “You should never allow campaign staff to be average. We expect the best out of everybody.”

Campaign cash initial concern as race began

Heading into this year’s Senate campaign, Baker said his main concern was having the necessary money to compete.

“We knew that Bredesen was going to self-fund and could simply keep stroking checks,” he said. Bredesen loaned his campaign \$7.5 million by the end of the race.

Because of that, Blackburn’s campaign held off spending money on television ads until one day before the Aug. 2 primary election. Haslam said the decision drew criticism from some in political circles.

“We knew that July and August would be tough and that polls would show Bredesen with a lead, but we quietly were building a war chest for the homestretch,” Baker wrote in a Nov. 8 campaign memo assessing the race.

“Once we put our foot on the gas pedal we never let up and kept Bredesen in a corner,” Baker wrote. “It was something he had never previously experienced.”

Haslam said the gambit ended up paying off. “They had a plan and the patience to carry that out, and you have to give them credit for it,” he said.

When Bredesen got in the race in December, Baker said he was never daunted.

“We wanted to run against the best they have to offer and we were able to win,” Baker said, referring to Bredesen, adding that the campaign’s biggest advantage was Blackburn, whom he views as genuine and knowledgeable.

All throughout the race, Baker would stress to his staff — and reporters — the importance of data to keep tabs on the campaign.

“I live by one simple credo,” Baker said. “Base your decisions on what you know, not what you think.”

Abbi Sigler, Blackburn's campaign spokeswoman, said their meetings were "all about the numbers."

Baker said everything the campaign did — from voters' reactions to phone calls and door knockers to new public polls and how people interacted on social media — was combined in a way to best inform their efforts along the way.

"You could see the difference between our campaign and Bredesen's in this regard. We believed he was going to run a 2006 type campaign, and we saw that from their weak investment in digital to their clipboard use in the field," he said.

'I wanted to win this one a lot'

It hasn't always been success for Baker along the way — which he says is actually a good thing. "I've learned more from adversity than I have success," he said.

Looking back on Blackburn's campaign, Baker said it has added significance.

"This one to me was meaningful because I have a great relationship with the Blackburn family and it's my home state," he said. "I wanted to win this one a lot."

Although he has close personal ties to Blackburn, Baker said he's not planning on joining her office in Washington, D.C.

When asked what's next, he said he planned to take his daughter to see "Ice! How the Grinch Stole Christmas" in Nashville.

Beyond that, Baker said he is largely focused on continuing his winning streak.

"I'm going to do everything I can in whatever Leader McConnell needs me to do for his re-election," he said.

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