

Thursday, February 26, 2004

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

McCRERY'S RUMORED RETIREMENT CAUSES UPHEAVAL IN NORTHWEST LOUISIANA

The rumors among politicians have been circulating since the Christmas holidays. The Fourth District Congressman may hang it up after 16 years in the U. S. House. Jim McCrery commutes back and forth to Washington every week, since wife, Johnette, has opted to raise their two sons in Shreveport. So Representative Jim could be coming home, and potential candidates galore are coming out of the woodwork to replace him.

Nothing is etched in stone. McCrery says he won't make any official announcement until mid-March. But the fact that he is talking about retiring is unheard of if he's seriously contemplating another term. Several potential candidates were looking at running against him even if he did run. And now, wannabes are already on the phone throughout the district trying to line up support.

Leading the list of possible replacements is incumbent Shreveport Mayor Keith Hightower (Democrat). The popular mayor served two terms on the Shreveport City Council and is in the middle of his second term running the city. Shreveport has term limitations so the Mayor is a lame duck, and is looking for a place to land. The congressional race could not come at a better time.

Hightower has over half a million dollars in his campaign fund, and is well connected in the Shreveport business community. He has the potential to raise quickly the million dollars it will take to make the runoff in this race. There has been some quiet talk of Hightower running against McCrery, so the Congressman's decision to step down will make it a sure thing that Hightower will be in the race.

PSC member Foster Campbell is also at the top of the list of names being discussed and has also left the door open in the U. S. Senate race. Campbell ran against McCrery in 1988, the last serious challenge that McCrery has faced. He knows the district well, and would be a strong candidate. But his recent election to the Public Service Commission, according to sources close to Campbell, makes the U. S. Senate race more attractive, at least for the present time. With money in the bank, Campbell can afford to wait several months before making a decision.

A number of other candidates are dropping hints that they are interested. They include:

John Milkovich (Democrat). A Shreveport attorney, Milkovich ran second to McCrery last year and received 27% of the vote. He says he will definitely be running. In the past he has put a lot of his own financial resources in the race.

State Rep. Taylor Townsend from Natchitoches (Democrat). Townsend was also a potential candidate even if McCrery did not retire. He would be the only candidate in the southern part of this district that runs from the Arkansas border, two-thirds the length of the state, almost to Lake Charles. Townsend, who will have strong political support from former Senator Don Kelley, can raise money. He is a trial lawyer. Need we say more? He too would be a strong candidate.

So far, I've listed only Democrats. McCrery is a Republican and has proven to be quiet popular in this district. So there will definitely be strong Republican interest. Early names on the list:

State Rep. Jane Smith (R) Bossier City. She was a popular superintendent of schools in Bossier, and has a good image as a reform legislator in Baton Rouge. If she could become the "consensus" Republican, she certainly would be a strong candidate.

State Rep. Wayne Waddell (R) Shreveport. A hard worker who is beginning his second term in the State House, he has been able to garner Democratic votes in his district. Can he raise the money?

Caddo Parish Sheriff Steve Prator (R). Prator served as Chief of Police in Shreveport and would have the inside track for support among sheriffs throughout the district. However, since they are not on the ballot themselves, this may not make that much difference.

State Rep. Mike Powell (R) Shreveport – Served on the Caddo Parish School Board for a number of years, and is a newly-elected state representative. He needs a little grooming in Baton Rouge before he takes on the congressional race. But with the so many candidates in the hunt, who knows?

Shreveport businessman Mike Woods (R). His father, Dalton Woods, was a major force in shaping the Republican Party some thirty years ago. Woods is a Shreveport oilman, and presently serves on the State Board of Supervisors for the University of Louisiana System appointed by Mike Foster. He has his own financial resources to spend.

Other names will no doubt be floated around. But the Democratic field looks strong, and this could be just one more setback for the Republican Party in the state. Just a few years ago, the Louisiana delegation in Congress was comprised of five Republicans and two Democrats. There is a good chance these numbers will reverse by the end of this year.

What are the issues in this race? Markedly different from those talked about affecting the Third District in Deep South Louisiana I discussed last week. Few natural resources here that have been exploited. There are significant coal deposits. (Some 1.5 billion tons) in

Red River and DeSoto parishes. The coal is used almost exclusively to run several power plants in Northwest Louisiana.

The gambling industry has a significant impact in this part of the state. But its future looks dim. Oklahoma now has an Indian casino that is attracting a number of Dallas players that used to come to Shreveport. And Texas is coming closer and closer to legalizing casino gambling that will drastically reduce the positive economic impact that is presently felt throughout both Northwest Louisiana and Lake Charles.

There are even concerns about Barksdale Air Force Base, one of the largest military bases in the country. Louisiana is losing a lot of its Washington clout with the retirement of so many prominent members of Congress. So the new congressman will have a real fight on his or her hands just to hang on to what the district has now.

What issue resonates in this part of the state? Transportation! Or rather the lack of it.

North Louisiana's best hope for the future is manufacturing. There is a good track record there already with a major General Motors plant. But you have to be able to transport what you build. I-49 north sounds like an Arkansas project. But it is vital to northwest Louisiana's ability to transport goods into the Midwest. U. S. Highway 171 South to Lake Charles is also a critical route for transporting manufactured goods.

It's no wonder the winner of this race is going to need "cross over votes" from the other party. Any candidate will make a mistake in running a referendum for or against the President. This district isn't quiet as strong in the "Louisiana first" category that will be a rallying cry in south Louisiana. But it still is going to be an important component in any successful campaign throughout this part of the state.

IS STATE FARM REALLY A GOOD NEIGHBOR?

State Farm has always been one of the more solid financial companies operating in Louisiana. And there is little doubt they have a first rate cadre of agents located throughout the state. But when it comes to demands by the home office, located in Bloomington, Illinois, they are hands down the pushiest guys on the block. Whenever they don't get their way, they threaten to pick up their marbles and go home. And you know what? They just did.

During the entire time I served as Insurance Commissioner, it seemed that a month did not go by that State Farm did not make one demand after another. They "just had" to be on every board and commission that set or recommended insurance direction and policy. When there were five members to be approved on the Louisiana Insurance Guaranty

Association (the group that assesses all insurance companies when a busted insurance company goes under), State Farm made no bones about the fact that they were “entitled” to a spot on this board. When a rate request was made, by the brass out of Illinois, there was always a subtle hint that State Farm could quit selling insurance in Louisiana, and perhaps the jobs in Monroe and other areas of the state might be at risk.

The “Good Neighbor” was there to lobby strongly in the legislature last year for legislation abolishing the Insurance Rating Commission. Commission members have been aggressive in questioning State Farm about their consumer practices, and why it was necessary for rate increases to be requested year after year. The state’s largest insurance company seemed almost incensed that Rating Commission members like David Chosen of Lake Charles and Mike Franks from Winnfield would have the “audacity” to question the requests for the higher auto and homeowners rates regularly made by State Farm.

Governor Foster was extremely reluctant to sign legislation abolishing the Rating Commission last year. He felt, at the time, and I agree, the Rating Commission served as a consumer watchdog, asking the tough questions of insurance companies that seem to constantly request higher and higher rates. But he finally gave in, commenting that, if the Insurance Rating Commission wasn’t abolished, State Farm might just pick up and leave. Well, guess what Governor? They got put on every board and commission that’s been appointed in the last twenty years, they rarely were turned down for a rate increase, and they got their way with the legislature in abolishing the Insurance Rating Commission. And what did they do? Picked up and left.

Like I said, the company itself is solid, and their agents are dependable and well-qualified. But let’s call it like it is. We got conned. The big guys out of Indiana have been planning all along to pack up at the right time.

State Farm will continue to operate in Louisiana, and will continue to make money like they have for many years, despite their protestations otherwise. And Monroe will survive without them. It’s just a shame they could not have been more up-front about their real intentions.

WILL YOUR BOTTLED WATER SPOIL?

About once a month, I spend several hours in the supermarket. Sometimes it’s at Albertson’s. At other times it’s the grocery section at Sam’s or Target. I load up on the things I want. Things that will last for a month or so. And I always buy bulk bottled water. I want to have a 12 to 16 ounce plastic bottle on hand to take in the car on the way to a workout or on a trip out of town.

I've just learned something new. Water can supposedly spoil. What? Water can go bad? What kind of con is this?

If you look on the label of different brands of bottled water, you will find an expiration date. Usually six months from the bottling date. Check out Poland Spring Bottles, Aquafina, Figi Brand (made by Coca-Cola), K9 Water, Nestle Waters and others. They all have expiration dates.

Many homeowners in rural areas have water wells to get their water right out of the ground. In fact, this is where most of our city water comes from. (Not so in New Orleans, the city of herbs and spices. They drink their water right out of the Mississippi River.) The water we drink has been sitting in the ground for decades or even longer. "Old" water versus "new" water tastes the same and has no difference in mineral content. It is simply a marketing scam.

Even the American Red Cross is spreading false information. Go to its website and you will be informed that you should replace stored bottled water every six months. But when confronted, they readily admit there is really no scientific basis for such advice. So to be sure, I went to our reliable federal government. If you go to the web site of the Department of Homeland Security (www.ready.gov), you are instructed to change your bottled water every six months. Justification? Well...they are not really sure. They just think it would be a good idea. (No doubt, the water they would recommend is produced by Halliburton). When contacted, the Department of Homeland Security says their recommendation is really directed at people who bottle their own tap water. But their site does not say this.

One state in the country, New Jersey, requires that bottled water carry an expiration date. The law was passed in 1987. So I contacted the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. They readily admitted they have no idea why the law was passed.

Well, what about Louisiana? We are one of several states in the country that require producers to stamp the packaged water with the bottling date. I checked with our health officials as to why. Nobody has any idea.

So, in summary, most of us drink water right out of the ground that has been there for decades with no adverse effect. But go purchase bottled water that costs more per gallon than a similar amount of gasoline, and you better use it quick. At least in a few states, including Louisiana. Really a dumb law.

MARTHA STEWART UPDATE

It seems like everyday in the continuing saga of the Martha Stewart trial, some ruling takes place that shows how “different” we are here in Louisiana.

Initially, the judge in the Stewart case followed the troubling tradition started in Louisiana of picking the jury in secret. Federal prosecutors in Stewart’s trial, as was the case of mine here in Louisiana, had asked that the jury selection be closed to the press and to the public.

The Second U. S. Court of Appeals in Manhattan last week ruled that the Stewart judge erred in refusing the media access to individual questioning of jurors, commenting that the jury should have been picked in an open forum. A number of media organizations had argued that high public interest in the Stewart case should not close the jury selection. The court said “We do not see anything in the district court’s findings, other than perhaps the degree of media coverage, that differentiates this case from any other high profile prosecution. The mere fact that the suit has been the subject of intense media coverage is not, however, sufficient to justify closure.”

The three judge appeals panel said that “to hold otherwise would render the First Amendment right of access meaningless.”

Just one more example of how there isn’t equal justice in this country. In New York, where a number of high profile trials take place regularly, jurors have to be picked in the open to, according to the Court of Appeals there, “guarantee a fair trial.” But not in Louisiana. When it came time to pick the jury in my case, my family, the press, and all of the spectators were asked to leave the courtroom. The jury was quizzed and picked in complete secrecy.

What kind of a message does this send to the jury? When they knew they were to be anonymous, and were picked in secrecy, was the message received that they were in some kind of danger, or that there was some “problem” with the defendants?

Just one more reason why Martha Stewart, whatever happens to her, is extremely lucky she was not tried in Louisiana.

I like to listen to our President talk. Whether you agree with his politics are not, he seems to be a likable guy. We sometimes get caught up in his easy going manner, but then we don’t actually listen to what he says. Here are a few quotes I just love.

“The vast majority of our imports come from outside the country.”

“If we don’t succeed, we run the risk of failure.”

“One word sums up probably the responsibility of any Government, and that one word is ‘to be prepared’.”

“I have made good judgments in the past. I have made good judgments in the future.”

President George W. Bush

More to come.

Peace and justice to you and your family.

Jim Brown